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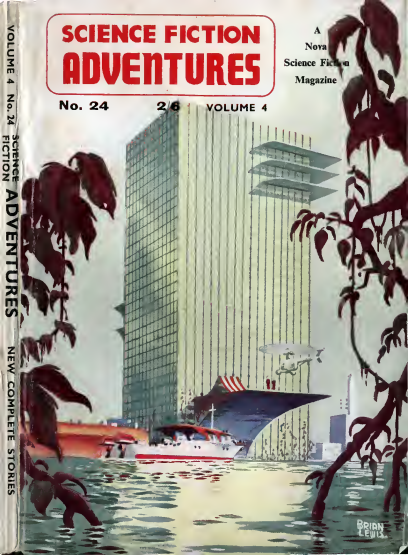
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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. No. 24

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Original Science Fiction Stories

Novelettes :

THE DROWNED WORLD J. G. Ballard 2

Only the tops of the world's great cities remained above sea level and the remnants of civilisation fought an unusual battle against strange dreams.

BLISS David Rome 57

The Ship was a long way from Earth—and most of Earth's culture had been forgotten, including how to be civilised.

Short Story :

PRESSURE Lee Harding 88

Edited by JOHN CARNELL

Cover painting by LEWIS illustrating "The Drowned World"

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Civilisation ended when the Earth's atmosphere changed slightly. In a drowned world Kerans' sole idea was to return to the ocean depths from which Man had once emerged.

THE DROWNED WORLD

by J. G. BALLARD

Chapter One

Soon it would be too hot. Looking out from the hotel balcony shortly after eight o'clock, Kerans watched the sun rise behind the dense groves of giant gymnosperms crowding over the roofs of the abandoned department stores four hundred yards away on the east side of the lagoon. Even through the massive olive-green fronds the relentless power of the sun was plainly tangible. The blunt refracted rays drummed against his bare shoulders and chest, drawing out the first sweat, and he slipped on a pair of heavy sunglasses to protect his eyes. The solar disc was no longer a well-defined sphere, but a wide expanding ellipse that fanned out across the eastern horizon like a colossal fire-ball, its reflection turning the dead leaden surface of the lagoon into a brilliant copper shield. By noon, less than four hours away, the water seemed to burn.

Usually Kerans would wake at five, and reach the biological testing station in time to put in at least four or five hours' work before the heat became intolerable, but this morning he found

himself reluctant to leave the cool, air-curtained haven of the hotel suite. He had spent a couple of hours over breakfast alone, deliberately delaying his departure until Colonel Riggs passed the hotel in his patrol boat, knowing that by then it would be too late to go to the station.

Leaning on the balcony rail, the slack water ten storeys below reflecting his thin angular shoulders and gaunt profile, he watched one of the countless thermal storms rip through a clump of huge horse-tails lining the creek which led out of the lagoon. For a few seconds the steam clouds hanging over the water dispersed, and a vicious miniature tornado lashed across the 60-feet-high plants, toppling them like matchsticks. Then, as abruptly, the storm vanished, leaving the great columnar trunks to subside among one another in the water like sluggish alligators.

Rationalising, Kerans told himself that he had been wise to remain in the hotel—the storms were erupting more and more frequently as the temperature rose—but he knew that his real motive was his acceptance that little now remained to be done. The biological mapping had become a pointless game, the new flora following exactly the emergent lines anticipated twenty years earlier, and he was sure that no-one at Camp Byrd in Northern Greenland bothered to file his reports, let alone read them.

In fact, old Dr. Bodkin, Kerans' assistant at the station, had slyly prepared what purported to be an eye-witness description by one of Colonel Riggs' corporals of a large sail-backed lizard with a gigantic dorsal fin that had been seen cruising across one of the lagoons, in all respects indistinguishable from the Pelycosaur, an early Pennsylvanian reptile. Had the report been taken at its face value—heralding the momentous return of the age of the great reptiles—an army of ecologists would have descended on them immediately, backed by a tactical atomic weapons unit and orders to proceed south at a steady twenty knots. But apart from the routine acknowledgement signal nothing had been heard. Perhaps even the specialists at Camp Byrd were too tired to laugh.

At the end of the month Colonel Riggs and his small holding group would finally abandon the city (had it once been Berlin, Paris or London, Kerans asked himself) and set off northward, towing the testing station with them. Kerans

found it difficult to believe that he would soon leave the pent-house suite where he had lived for the past six months. The Ritz's reputation, he gladly agreed, was richly deserved, and it saddened him slightly to think that he was the last guest who would stay at the hotel. The suite had originally been designed for a Milanese financier, and was lavishly furnished and engineered.

The heat curtains were still perfectly sealed, although the first six storeys of the hotel were below water level and the walls were beginning to crack, and the 250-amp air-conditioning unit had worked without a halt. Too many of the other buildings around the lagoon had long since slipped and slid away below the silt, revealing their gimcrack origins, and the Ritz now stood in splendid isolation on the west shore, even the rich blue moulds sprouting from the carpets in the high dark corridors adding to its 19th Century dignity.

A giant *Anopheles* mosquito, the size of a dragon-fly, spat through the air past his face, then dived down towards the floating jetty where Kerans' catamaran was moored. The sun was still hidden behind the vegetation on the eastern side of the lagoon, but the mounting heat was bringing the huge vicious insects out of their lairs all over the moss-covered surface of the hotel. Kerans was reluctant to leave the balcony and retreat behind the wire-mesh enclosure. In the early morning light a strange mournful beauty hung over the lagoon; the sombre green-black fronds of the gymnosperms, intruders from the Triassic past, and the half-submerged white-faced buildings of the 20th Century still reflected together in the dark mirror of the water, the two interlocking worlds apparently suspended at some junction in time, the illusion momentarily broken when a giant water spider cleft the oily surface a hundred yards away.

In the distance, somewhere beyond the drowned bulk of a large Gothic building half a mile to the south, a diesel engine coughed and surged. Kerans left the balcony, closing the wire door behind him, and went into the bathroom to shave. Water had long ceased to flow through the gold-plated taps into the black marble basin, but Kerans maintained a reservoir in the plunge bath, carefully purified in a home-made still on the roof and piped in through the window.

Although he was only forty, Kerans' beard had been turned white by the radio-fluorine in the water, but his bleached

crew-cut hair and deep amber tan made him appear at least ten years younger. A chronic lack of appetite, and the new malarias, had shrunk the dry leathery skin under his cheekbones, emphasising the ascetic cast of his face, but in general his manner was relaxed and informal. On the way out he picked a monographed cream silk shirt from the stack left in the wardrobe by the financier, and slipped into a pair of neatly pressed slacks with a Zurich label.

He reached the landing stage as Colonel Riggs' cutter pulled in against the catamaran.

"Morning, Robert," Riggs greeted him, jumping down on to the swaying platform of fifty-gallon drums lashed inside a wooden frame. "Glad you're still here. I've got a job on my hands you can help me with. Can you take the morning off from the station?"

Kerans helped him on to the concrete balcony that had once jutted from a seventh-floor suite. "Of course, Colonel. As a matter of fact, I have already." Technically Riggs had overall authority for the testing station and Kerans should have asked his permission, but the relationship between the two men was without ceremony. They had worked together for over three years, as the testing station and its military escort had moved slowly northward through the European lagoons, and Riggs was content to let Kerans and Bodkin get on with their work, sufficiently busy himself with the jobs of mapping the shifting keys and harbours and evacuating the last inhabitants.

In the latter task he often needed Kerans' help, for most of the people still living on in the sinking cities were either psychopaths or suffering from malnutrition and radiation sickness. Despite his brisk military front, Kerans found the Colonel intelligent and sympathetic, and with a concealed reserve of droll humour. Sometimes he wondered whether to test this by telling the Colonel about Bodkin's Pelycosaur, but on the whole decided against it.

The corporal concerned in the hoax, a dour conscientious Scotsman called Macready, had climbed up on to the wire cage that enclosed the deck of the cutter and was carefully sweeping away the heavy fronds and vines strewn across it. None of the three other men tried to help him; under their heavy tans their faces looked pinched and drawn. The

continuous heat and the massive daily doses of antibiotics drained all energy from them.

As the sun rose up over the lagoon, driving clouds of steam into the great golden pall, Kerans felt the terrible stench of the water-line, the sweet compacted smells of dead vegetation and rotting animal carcasses. Huge flies spun by, bouncing off the wire cage of the cutter, and giant bats raced across the water towards their eyries in the ruined buildings. Beautiful and serene from his balcony a few minutes earlier, Kerans realised that the lagoon was nothing more than a garbage-filled swamp.

"Let's go up on to the deck," he suggested to Riggs. "I'll buy you a drink. What's your problem?"

"It's not *my* problem. If anything, in fact, it's yours." Riggs trudged up the staircase, slapping with his baton at the vines entwined around the rail. "Haven't you got the lift working yet? I always thought this place was over-rated." However he nodded appreciatively when they stepped into the clear ice-cool air of the penthouse, and sat down thankfully in one of the gilt-legged Louis XV armchairs. He indicated the grey-metal radio console half-buried under a pile of books. "Ever try listening to that thing?"

Kerans shook his head, pressing a tab in the wall and waiting as the cocktail bar disgorged itself from the wall. "Never. Is there any point? We know all the news for the next three million years."

"You don't. Really, you should switch it on just now and then. Hear all sorts of interesting things." He took a large Scotch from Kerans. "For example, this morning you would have heard that exactly three days from now we're packing up and leaving here for good." He nodded when Kerans looked round in surprise. "Came through last night from Byrd. Apparently the water level's still rising, all the work we've done has been a total waste—as I've always maintained, incidentally. The American and Russian units are being recalled as well. Temperatures at the Equator are up to one hundred and eighty degrees now, still rising steadily, and rain belts are continuous as high as the Twentieth parallel. There's more silt too——"

He broke off, watching Kerans speculatively. "What's the matter? Aren't you relieved to be going?"

"Of course," Kerans said, still holding his unfilled glass. He seemed to be searching the room for something. "Three days, you said?"

"What do you want—three million?" Riggs chuckled to himself. "Robert, I think you secretly want to stay behind."

Kerans filled his glass, collecting himself. He had only managed to survive the previous year by deliberately suspending himself outside the normal world of time and space, and the abrupt return to earth had momentarily disconcerted him. In addition, he knew, there were other motives and responsibilities.

"Don't be absurd," he replied easily. "Naturally I'm glad to be going. Though I admit I have enjoyed being here. Perhaps it appeals to my *fin de siècle* temperament. Up at Camp Byrd I'll be living in half a mess tin." He finished his drink abruptly. "Look, Colonel, I don't think I'll be able to come with you this morning after all. Something rather urgent has come up." He noticed Riggs nodding slowly. "I see. That was your problem. *My problem.*"

Riggs stood up, buttoning his jacket. "Right. I rang her last night, and saw her again this morning. You'll have to convince her, Robert. At present she refuses point-blank to go. She doesn't realise that this time is the end, that there'll be no more holding units. She may be able to hang on for another six months, but next March, when the rain belts reach here, we won't even be able to get a helicopter in. Anyway, by then no-one will care. I told her that, and she just walked away."

Kerans smiled bleakly, visualising the familiar swirl of hip and haughty stride. "Beatrice can be difficult sometimes," he temporised, hoping that she hadn't offended Riggs. It would probably take more than three days to change her mind and he wanted to be sure that the Colonel would still be waiting. "She's a complex person, lives on many levels. Until they all synchronise she can behave as if she's insane."

Five minutes later, the catamaran gliding and swirling behind the cutter, they set off from the hotel across the lagoon. Golden waves glimmered up into the boiling air, the ring of massive plants around them seeming to dance in the heat gradients like a voodoo jungle.

"If she stays here much longer she *will* be insane," Riggs shouted across the roar of the two outboard diesels. "By

the way, that reminds me of another reason why we've got to get out." He glanced across at the tall lonely figure of Corporal Macready at the tiller, his eyes staring fixedly at the water, and at the pinched haunted faces of the other men. "Tell me, Doctor, how do you sleep these days?"

For a moment Kerans wondered whether the question obliquely referred to himself and Beatrice Dahl. "Very soundly," he replied carefully. "Never better. Why do you ask?"

But Riggs merely nodded and began to shout instructions to Macready.

Chapter Two

Screeching like a dispossessed banshee, a large hammer-nosed bat soared out of one of the narrow inlets off the creek and swerved straight towards the cutter. Its sonar confused by the labyrinth of giant webs spun across the inlet by the colonies of wolf spiders, it missed the wire hood above Kerans' head by only a few feet, and then sailed away along the line of submerged office blocks, gliding in and out of the huge sail-like fronds of the fern-trees sprouting from their roofs. Suddenly, as it passed one of the projecting cornices, a motionless stone-headed creature snapped out and plucked the bat from the air. There was a brief piercing squawk and Kerans caught a glimpse of the crushed wings clamped in the lizard's jaws. Then the reptile shrank back invisibly among the foliage.

All the way down the creek, perched in the windows of the office blocks and department stores, the iguanas watched them go past, their hard frozen heads jerking stiffly. They launched themselves into the wake of the cutter, snapping at the insects dislodged from the air-weed and rotting logs, then swam through the windows and clambered up the staircases to their former vantage points, piled three deep across each other. Without the reptiles, the lagoons and the creeks of office blocks half-submerged in the immense heat would have had a strange dream-like beauty, but the iguanas and basilisks brought the fantasy down to earth. As their seats in the one-time boardrooms indicated, the reptiles had taken over the city. Once again they were the dominant form of life.

Looking up at the ancient impassive faces, Kerans could understand the curious fear they roused, re-kindling archaic memories of the terrifying jungles of the Paleocene, when the reptiles had gone down before the emergent mammals, and sense the implacable hatred one zoological class feels towards another that usurps it.

At the end of the creek they entered the next lagoon, a wide circle of dark green water almost half a mile in diameter. A lane of red plastic buoys marked a channel towards an opening on the far side. The cutter, a square flat-bottomed skiff like a huge shoe-box, had a draught of little more than a foot, and as they moved along through the flat water, the sun slanting down behind them opening up the submerged depths, they could see the clear outlines of five- and six-storey buildings looming like giant ghosts, here and there a moss-covered roof breaking the surface as the swell rolled past it.

Sixty feet below the cutter a straight grey promenade stretched away between the buildings, the remains of some former thoroughfare, the black humped shells of cars still standing by the curb. Many of the lagoons in the centre of the city were surrounded by an intact ring of buildings, and consequently little silt had entered them. Free of vegetation, apart from a few drifting clumps of Sargasso weed, the streets and shops had been preserved almost intact, like a reflection in a lake that has somehow lost its original.

The bulk of the city had long since vanished, and only the steel-supported buildings of the central commercial and financial areas had survived the encroaching flood waters. The brick houses and single-storey factories of the suburbs had disappeared completely below the drifting tides of silt. Where these broke surface giant forests reared up into the burning dull-green sky, smothering the former wheatfields of temperate Europe and North America. Impenetrable *Matto Grossos* over two hundred feet high, they were a nightmare world of competing organic forms returning rapidly to their Paleozoic past, and the only avenues of transit for the government units were through the lagoon systems that had superimposed themselves on the former cities. But even these were now being clogged with silt and then submerged.

Kerans could remember the unending succession of green twilights that had settled behind them as he and Riggs moved slowly northward across Europe, leaving one city after another,

the miasmic vegetation swamping the narrow canals and crowding from roof-top to roof-top.

Now they were about to abandon yet another city. Despite the massive construction of the main commercial buildings, it consisted of little more than three principal lagoons, surrounded by a nexus of small lakes fifty yards in diameter and a network of narrow creeks and inlets which wound off, roughly following the original street-plan of the city, into the outlying jungle. Here they either vanished altogether or expanded into the steaming sheets of open water that were the residues of the former oceans. In turn these gave way to the archipelagoes that coalesced to form the solid jungles of the southern massif.

The military base set up by Riggs and his platoon, which harboured the biological testing station, was in the most southerly of the three lagoons, sheltered by a number of the tallest buildings of the city, thirty-storey blocks in what had once been the down-town financial sector.

As they crossed the lagoon, leaving the base behind on their left, Kerans gazed up at the rectangular cliffs, enough of the windows intact to remind him of the illustrations of sun-dazzled promenades at Nice, Rio and Miami he had read about as a child in the encyclopaedias at Camp Byrd. Curiously, though, despite the potent magic of the lagoon worlds and the drowned cities, he had never felt any interest in their contents, and never bothered to identify which of the cities he was stationed in.

Dr. Bodkin, twenty-five years his senior, had actually lived in several of them, both in Europe and America, and spent most of his spare time punting around the remoter water-ways, searching out former libraries and museums. Not that they contained anything other than his memories.

Perhaps it was this absence of personal memories that made Kerans indifferent to the spectacle of these sinking civilisations. He had been born and brought up entirely within what had once been known as the Arctic Circle—now a sub-tropical zone with an annual mean temperature of eighty degrees—and had come southward only on joining one of the ecological surveys in his early 30's. The vast swamps and jungles had been a fabulous laboratory, the submerged cities little more than elaborate pedestals.

Apart from a few older men such as Bodkin there was no one who remembered living in them—and even during Bodkin's childhood the cities had been beleaguered citadels, hemmed in by enormous dykes and disintegrated by panic and despair. Their charm and beauty lay precisely in their emptiness, in the strange junction of two extremes of nature, like a discarded crown overgrown by wild orchids.

The succession of gigantic geophysical upheavals that had transformed the Earth's climate had made their first impact some sixty or seventy years earlier. Prolonged and violent solar storms lasting several years and caused by a slight instability in the Sun had diminished Earth's gravitational hold upon the outer layers of the ionosphere. As these vanished into space, depleting the Earth's barrier against the full impact of solar radiation, temperatures began to climb steadily, the heated atmosphere expanding outwards into the ionosphere where the cycle was completed.

All over the world mean temperatures rose by a few degrees each year. The majority of tropical areas became rapidly uninhabitable, entire populations migrating north or south from temperatures of a hundred and thirty or a hundred and forty degrees. Once-temperate areas became tropical, Europe and North America sweltering under continuous heat waves, temperatures rarely falling below a hundred degrees. Under the direction of the United Nations, the colonisation began of the Antarctic plateau and of the northern borders of the Canadian and Russian continents.

Over this initial period of twenty years a gradual adjustment of life took place to meet the altered climate. A slackening of the previous tempo was inevitable, and there was little spare energy available to cut back the encroaching jungles of the equatorial region. Not only was the growth of all plant forms accelerated, but the higher levels of radioactivity increased the rate at which mutations occurred. The first freak botanical forms appeared, recalling the giant tree-ferns of the Carboniferous period, and there was a drastic upsurge of all lower plant and animal forms.

The arrival of these distant forbears was overlaid by the second major geophysical upheaval. The continued heating of the atmosphere had begun to melt the polar ice-caps. The entrained ice-seas of the Antarctic plateau broke and dissolved, tens of thousands of glaciers around the Arctic Circle, from

Greenland and Northern Europe, Russia and North America, poured themselves into the sea, millions of acres of permafrost liquefied into gigantic rivers.

Here again the rise of global water levels would have been little more than a few feet, but the huge discharging channels carried with them billions of tons of top-soil. Massive deltas formed at their mouths, extending the continental coastlines and damming up the oceans. Their effective spread shrank from two-thirds of the world's area to only slightly more than half.

Driving the submerged silt before them, the new seas completely altered the shape and contours of the continents. The Mediterranean contracted into a system of inland lakes, the British Isles was linked again with northern France. The Middle West of the United States, filled by the Mississippi as it drained the Rocky Mountains, became an enormous gulf opening into the Hudson Bay, while the Caribbean Sea was transformed into a desert of silt and salt flats. Europe became a system of giant lagoons, centred on the principal low lying cities, inundated by the silt carried southwards by the expanding rivers.

During the next thirty years the pole-ward migration of populations continued. A few fortified cities defied the rising water-levels and the encroaching jungle, building elaborate sea-walls around their perimeters, but one by one these were breached. Only within the former Arctic and Antarctic Circles was life tolerable. The oblique incidence of the Sun's rays provided a shield against the more powerful radiation. Cities on higher ground in mountainous areas nearer the Equator had been abandoned despite their cooler temperatures because of the diminished atmospheric protection.

It was this last factor which provided its own solution to the problem of re-settling the migrant populations of the new Earth. The steady decline in mammalian fertility, and the growing ascendancy of amphibian and reptile forms best adapted to an aquatic life in the lagoons and swamps, inverted the ecological pattern, and by the time of Kerans' birth at Camp Byrd, a city of ten thousand in northern Greenland, it was estimated that fewer than five million people were still living on the polar caps.

The birth of a child had become a rarity, and only one marriage in ten yielded any offspring. As Kerans sometimes reminded himself, the genealogical tree of mankind was

systematically pruning itself, apparently moving backwards in time, and a point might ultimately be reached where a second Adam and Eve found themselves alone in a new Eden.

Riggs noticed him smiling to himself at this conceit. "What's amusing you, Robert? Another of your obscure jokes? Don't try to explain it to me."

"I was just casting myself in a new role." Kerans looked out over the rail at the office blocks sliding past twenty feet away, the wash from the cutter splashing through the open windows along the water-line. The sharp tang of wet lime contrasted freshly with the over-sweet odours of the vegetation. Macready had taken them into the shadow of the buildings and it was pleasantly cool behind the breaking spray.

Over on the sun-ward side of the lagoon the yellow-striped three-storey drum of the floating base was almost obscured in the reflected light, the rotating blades of the helicopter on its roof throwing brilliant lances across the water at them. Two hundred yards down shore the smaller white-painted hull of the testing station seemed to have moved from its usual moorings against a broad hump-backed building that had been a former concert hall. Taking off his sunglasses, he saw that one of the motor launches was towing it slowly up-stream towards the base, and realised with a slight start that Riggs had meant what he said about leaving in three days' time.

Macready swung the tiller, and they pivoted round in a fan of spray into the lee of a tall white-faced building that lifted a full twenty storeys out of the water. The projecting roof of an adjacent smaller block served as a jetty, next to which was moored a rusty white-hulled power cruiser. The raked perspex windows of the driving cabin were cracked and stained, and the exhaust vents leaked a scaly oil on to the water.

They jumped down on to the jetty and crossed a narrow metal gangway that led into the apartment block. The walls of the corridor were slick with moisture, huge patches of mould feeding on the plaster, but the lift was still working, powered by the emergency diesel. They rose slowly towards the roof and stepped out on to the upper level of the duplex, then walked down a service corridor to the outer deck.

Directly below them was the lower level, a small pool with a covered patio, bright deck chairs drawn up in the shade by

the diving board. Beyond the far end of the pool was a wide open view of the lagoon, the city emerging from the encroaching jungle, flat sheets of silver water expanding towards the green blur along the southern horizon. Massive silt banks lifted their backs through the surface, a light yellow fur along their spines marking the emergence of the first giant bamboo groves.

The helicopter rose from its platform on the roof of the base and arced upwards into the air towards them, the pilot swinging the tail as he changed direction, then roared overhead, two men in the open hatchway searching the rooftops with binoculars.

Beatrice Dahl lay back on one of the deck chairs, her long oiled body gleaming in the shadows like a sleeping python. The pink-tipped fingers of one hand rested lightly on an ice-filled glass on a table beside her, the other hand turned slowly through the pages of a magazine. Wide blue-black sunglasses masked her smooth sleek face, but Kerans noted the slightly sullen pout of her firm lower lip. Obviously Riggs had annoyed her, forcing her to accept the logic of his argument.

The Colonel paused at the rail, looking down at the beautiful supple body with ungrudging approval. Noticing him, Beatrice pulled off her sunglasses, then tightened the loosened back-strings of her bikini under her arms. Her eyes glinted quietly.

"All right, you two, get on with it. I'm not a strip show."

Riggs chuckled and trotted down the white metal stairway, Kerans at his heels, wondering how he was going to persuade Beatrice to leave her private sanctuary.

"My dear Miss Dahl, you should be flattered that I keep coming to see you," Riggs told her, lifting back the awning and sitting down on one of the chairs. "Besides, as the military governor of this area—" here he winked slyly at Kerans "—I have certain responsibilities towards you. And vice versa."

Beatrice regarded him briefly with a jaundiced eye and reached out to turn up the volume of the radiogram behind her. "And what about you, Robert? What brings you out so early in the day?"

Kerans shrugged, smiling at her amiably. "I missed you."

"Good boy. I thought perhaps that the gauleiter here had been trying to frighten you with his horror stories."

"Well, he has, as a matter of fact." Kerans took the magazine propped against Beatrice's knee and leafed through it idly. It was a forty-year-old issue of *Paris Vogue*, from its icy pages evidently kept somewhere in cold storage. He dropped it on the green-tiled floor. "Bea, it looks as if we'll all have to leave here in a couple of days' time. The Colonel and his men are pulling out for good. We can't very well stay on after he's gone."

"We?" she repeated dryly. "I didn't know there was any chance of your staying behind?"

Kerans glanced involuntarily at Riggs, who was watching him steadily. "There isn't," he said firmly. "You know what I mean. There'll be a lot to do in the next forty-eight hours, try not to complicate things by making a last emotional stand."

Before the girl could cut back at Kerans, Riggs added smoothly: "The temperature is still going up, Miss Dahl, you won't find it easy to stand one hundred and thirty degrees when the fuel for your generator runs out. The big Equatorial rain belts are moving northward, and they'll be here in a month. When they leave, the water in that pool—" he indicated the tank of steaming, insect-strewn fluid—"will damn nearly boil. What with the Type X Anopheles, skin cancers and the iguanas shrieking all night down below, you'll get precious little sleep." Closing his eyes for a moment, he added pensively: "That is, assuming that you still want any."

At this last remark the girl's mouth fretted slightly. Kerans realised that the quiet ambiguity in Riggs' voice had not been directed at his relationship with Beatrice. The Colonel went on: "In addition, some of the human scavengers driven northward out of the Mediterranean lagoons won't be too easy to deal with."

Beatrice tossed her long black hair over one shoulder. "I'll keep the door locked, Colonel."

Irritated, Kerans snapped: "For God's sake, Beatrice, what are you trying to prove? These self-destructive impulses may be amusing to play with now, but when we've gone they won't be so funny. The Colonel's only trying to help you—he doesn't really give a hoot whether you stay behind or not."

Riggs stood up. "Well, I wouldn't say that. Anyway, I'll see you later, Doctor." He saluted Beatrice with a smile. "Some time tomorrow I'll send the cutter over to collect your gear, Miss Dahl."

Chapter Three

When Riggs had gone Kerans lay back in his chair, watching the helicopter circle over the adjacent lagoon. Now and then it dived along the water's edge, the down-draught from its rotor blades beating through the flapping fronds of the fern-trees. Beatrice brought a drink from the small chromium bar at the rear of the patio and sat down on the chair at his feet.

"I wish you wouldn't analyse me in front of that man, Robert." She handed him the drink and then leaned against his knees, resting her chin on one wrist. Usually she looked sleek and well-fed, but her expression today seemed tired and wistful.

"I'm sorry," Kerans apologised. "Perhaps I was really analysing myself. Riggs' ultimatum came as a bit of a surprise; I wasn't expecting to leave so soon."

"You are going to leave then?"

Kerans paused. The automatic player in the radiogram switched from Beethoven's Pastoral to the Seventh, Toscanini giving way to Bruno Walter. All day, without a break, it played through the cycle of nine symphonies. He searched for an answer, the change of mood, to the sombre opening motif of the Seventh, overlaying his indecision.

"I suppose I want to, but I haven't yet found an adequate reason. Satisfying one's emotional needs isn't enough. There's got to be a more valid motive. Perhaps these sunken lagoons simply remind me of the drowned world of my uterine childhood—if so, the best thing is to leave straight away. Everything Riggs says is true. There's little hope of standing up to the rainstorms and the malaria."

He placed his hand on her forehead, feeling her temperature like a child. "What did Riggs mean when he said you wouldn't sleep well? That was the second time this morning he mentioned it."

Beatrice looked away for a moment. "Oh, nothing. I've just had one or two peculiar nightmares recently. A lot of people get them. Forget it. Tell me, Robert, seriously—if I decide to stay on here, would you? You could share this apartment."

Kerans grinned. "Trying to tempt me, Bea? What a question. Remember, not only are you the most beautiful woman here, but you're the only woman. Adam had no

aesthetic sense, or he would have realised that Eve was a pretty haphazard piece of work."

"You are being frank today." Beatrice stood up and went over to the edge of the pool. She swept her hair back off her forehead with both hands, her long supple body gleaming against the sunlight. "But is there as much urgency as Riggs claims? We've got the cruiser."

"It's a wreck. The first serious storm will split it open like a rusty can."

Nearing noon, the heat on the terrace had become uncomfortable and they left the patio and went indoors. Double venetian blinds filtered a thin sunlight into the low wide lounge, and the refrigerated air was cool and soothing. Beatrice stretched out on a long pale-blue elephant hide sofa, one hand playing with the fleecy pile of the carpet. The apartment had been one of her grandfather's *pied a terres*, and Kerans wondered how far his personality and its strange internal perspectives had been carried forward into his granddaughter. Over the mantelpiece was a huge painting by the early 20th Century surrealist Delvaux, in which ashen-faced women danced naked to the waist with dignified skeletons in tuxedos against a spectral bone-like landscape. On another wall one of Max Ernst's self-devouring phantasmagoric jungles screamed silently to itself, like the sump of some insane unconscious.

For a few moments Kerans stared quietly at the dim yellow annulus of Ernst's sun glowering through the exotic vegetation, a curious feeling of memory and recognition signalling through his brain. Far more potent than the Beethoven, the image of the archaic sun burned against his mind, illuminating the fleeting shadows that darted fitfully through its profoundest depths.

"Beatrice."

She looked up at him as he walked across to her, a light frown crossing her eyes.

"You realise that if we let Riggs go without us we don't merely leave here later. We *stay*."

Later that night, as Kerans lay asleep in his bunk at the testing station, the dark waters of the lagoon outside drifting through the drowned city, the first of the dreams came to him. He had left his cabin and walked out on to the deck, looking

down over the rail at the black luminous disc of the lagoon. Dense palls of opaque gas swirled across the sky only a few hundred feet overhead, through which he could just discern the faint glimmering outline of a gigantic sun. Booming distantly, it sent dull glows pulsing across the lagoon, momentarily lighting the long limestone cliffs which had taken the place of the ring of white-faced buildings.

Reflecting these intermittent flares, the deep bowl of the water shone in a diffused opalescent blur, the discharged light of myriads of phosphorescing animalcula, congregating in dense shoals like a succession of submerged haloes. Between them the water was thick with thousands of entwined snakes and eels, writhing together in frantic tangles that tore the surface of the lagoon.

As the great sun drummed nearer, almost filling the sky itself, the dense vegetation along the limestone cliffs was flung back abruptly, to reveal the black and stone-grey heads of enormous Triassic lizards. Strutting forward to the edge of the cliffs, they began to roar together at the sun, the noise gradually separating until it became indistinguishable from the volcanic pounding of the solar flares. Beating within him like his own pulse, Kerans felt the powerful mesmeric pull of the baying reptiles, and stepped out into the lake, whose waters now seemed an extension of his own blood-stream. As the dull pounding rose, he felt the barriers which divided his own cells from the surrounding medium dissolving, and he swam forwards, spreading outwards across the black thudding water . . .

He woke in the suffocating metal box of his cabin, his head splitting like a burst marrow, too exhausted to open his eyes. Even as he sat on the bed, splashing his face in the luke-warm water from the jug, he could still see the vast inflamed disc of the spectral sun, still hear the tremendous drumming of its beat. Timing them, he realised that the frequency was that of his own heartbeats, but in some insane way the sounds were magnified so that they remained just above the auditory threshold, pursuing him as he opened the cabin door and moved towards the galley.

Then he remembered that Beatrice Dahl had seen the same dream and pulled himself together. He went out on to the deck and looked up at the distant spire of the apartment block, trying to decide whether to drive across to her.

Bodkin was sitting at the table in the galley, placidly drinking coffee. His shrewd quick eyes, misleadingly set in a sagging face, watched Kerans unobtrusively as he lowered himself into a chair.

"So you're one of the dreamers now, Robert. You look tired. Was it a deep one?"

Kerans managed an uneasy laugh. "Are you trying to frighten me, Alan? I wouldn't know yet, but it felt deep enough. God, I wish I hadn't spent last night here. There are no nightmares at the Ritz." He sipped pensively at the hot coffee. "So that's what Riggs was talking about. How many of his men are seeing these dreams?"

"Riggs himself doesn't, but at least half the others. And Beatrice Dahl, of course. I've been seeing them for a full three months. It's basically the same recurrent dream in all cases."

Kerans gazed out through the window at the yellow bulk of the floating base moored alongside. High up on the top deck the helicopter pilot was standing motionless by the rail, staring across the cool early morning water. Perhaps he too had just woken from the same corporate nightmare, was filling his eyes with the olive-green spectrum of the lagoon in the hope of erasing the burning image of the dim Triassic sun. Kerans looked down at the dark shadows below the table, seeing again the faint glimmer of the phosphorescing pools. Distantly in his ears he could hear the sun drumming over the sunken water. As he recovered from his first fears he realised that there was something soothing about its sounds, almost reassuring and encouraging like his own heartbeats. But the giant reptiles had been terrifying.

To Bodkin he said: "Remind me to take a phenobarb tonight, Alan."

"Don't," Bodkin warned him firmly. "Not unless you want the impact doubled. Your residues of conscious control are the only thing holding up the dam." He buttoned his neat cotton jacket around his shirtless midriff. "That wasn't a true dream, Robert, but an ancient organic memory millions of years old."

He pointed at the ascending rim of the sun through the groves of gymnosperms. "The innate releasing mechanisms laid down in your cytoplasm millions of years ago have been awakened, the expanding sun and the rising temperature are

driving you back down the spinal levels into the drowned seas submerged beneath the lowest layers of your unconscious. This is the lumbar transfer, total biopsychic recall. We really remember these swamps and lagoons. After a few nights you won't be frightened of the dreams, despite their superficial horror. That's why Riggs has received orders for us to leave."

"The Pelycosaur . . . ?" Kerans asked.

Boskin nodded. "The joke was on us. The reason they didn't take it seriously at Byrd was that ours wasn't the first to be reported."

Footsteps sounded up the companionway and moved briskly along the metal deck outside. Colonel Riggs pushed back the double swing doors, freshly scrubbed and breakfasted.

He waved his baton at them amiably, eyeing the litter of unwashed cups and his two bare-chested subordinates.

"God, what a shambles. Morning to you both. We've got a busy day ahead of us so let's get our elbows off the table. I've fixed the departure time for twelve hundred hours tomorrow, and there'll be a final embarkation stand-by at ten hundred. I don't want to waste any more fuel than I have to, so dump everything you can overboard. You all right, Robert?"

"Perfectly," Kerans replied flatly, sitting up.

"Glad to hear it. You look a bit glassy. Right, then. If you want to borrow the cutter to evacuate the Ritz . . ."

Kerans listened to him automatically, watching the sun as it rose magnificently behind the gesticulating outline of the Colonel. What completely separated them now was the single fact that Riggs had not seen the dream, not felt its immense hallucinatory power. He was still obeying reason and logic, buzzing around his diminished, unimportant world with his little parcels of instructions like a worker bee about to return to the home nest. After a few minutes he ignored the Colonel completely and listened to the deep subliminal drumming in his ears, half-closed his eyes so that he could see the glimmering surface of the lake dapple across the dark underhang of the table.

Opposite him Bodkin appeared to be doing the same, his hands folded across his waist. Through how many of their recent conversations had he in fact been miles away?

When Riggs left, Kerans followed him to the door. "Of course, Colonel, everything will be ready in good time. Thank you for calling."

As the cutter moved off across the lagoon he went back to his chair. For a few minutes the two men stared across the table at each other, the insects outside bouncing off the wire mesh as the sun lifted into the sky. At last Kerans spoke.

"Alan, I'm not sure whether I shall be leaving."

Without replying, Bodkin took out his cigarettes. "Do you know where we are?" he asked after a pause. "The name of this city?" When Kerans shook his head he said: "Part of it used to be called London, not that it matters. Curiously enough, though, I was born here. Yesterday I rowed over to the old University quarter, a mass of little creeks, actually found the laboratory where my father used to teach. We left here when I was six, but I can just remember being taken to meet him one day. A few hundred yards away there was a planetarium, I saw a performance once—that was before they had to re-align the projector. The big dome is still there, about twenty feet below water. It looks like an enormous shell, fucus growing all over it, straight out of 'The Water Babies'—" He broke off abruptly, his face suddenly tired.

"Go on," Kerans said evenly.

Chapter Four

The two men moved quickly along the deck, their padded soles soundless on the metal plates. A white midnight sky hung across the dark surface of the lagoon, a few stationary clumps of cumulus like sleeping galleons. The low night sounds of the jungle drifted over the water; occasionally a marmoset gibbered or the iguanas shrieked distantly from their eyries in the submerged office blocks. Myriads of insects festered along the water-line, momentarily disturbed as the swells rolled in against the base, slapping at the canted sides of the pontoon.

One by one Kerans began to cast off the restraining lines, taking advantage of the swells to lift the loops off the rusting bollards. As the station slowly pivoted away he looked up anxiously at the dark bulk of the base. Gradually the three nearside blades of the helicopter came into view above the top

deck, then the slender tail rotor. He paused before releasing the last line, waiting for Bodkin to give the all-clear from the top deck of the station.

The tension on the line had doubled, and it took him several minutes to work the metal loop up the curving lip of the bollard, the successive swells giving him a few inches of slack as the station tilted, followed a moment later by the base. Above him he could hear Bodkin whispering impatiently—they had swung right around into the narrow interval of water behind them and were now face on to the lagoon, the single light in Beatrice Dahl's penthouse burning on its pylon. Then he cleared the lip and lowered the heavy cable into the slack water three feet below, watching it cleave back towards the base.

Freed of its attendant burden, and with its centre of gravity raised by the helicopter on its roof, the huge drum rolled over a full five degrees from the vertical, then gradually regained its balance. A light in one of the cabins went on, then flicked off again after a few moments. Kerans seized the boat-hook on the deck beside him as the interval of open water widened, first to twenty, then to fifty yards. A low current moved steadily through the lagoons, and would carry them back along the shore to their former mooring.

Holding the station off from the buildings they skirted, now and then crushing the great soft fern-trees sprouting through the windows, they soon covered two hundred yards, slowing as the current diminished around the curve, and finally lodged in a narrow inlet about a hundred feet square in size.

Kerans leaned over the rail, looking down through the dark water at the small cinema theatre twenty feet below the surface, its flat roof luckily uncluttered by lift-heads or fire escapes. Waving to Bodkin on the deck above, he stepped in through the laboratory and made his way past the specimen tanks and sinks to the companionway leading down to the float.

Only one stop-cock had been built into the base of the float, but as he spun the handwheel a powerful jet of cold foaming water gushed up across his legs. By the time he returned to the lower deck, after a final check of the laboratory, water was already spilling ankle-deep through the scuppers. The station went down like a lift, and he waded waist-deep to the

companionway and climbed up to the next deck where Bodkin was exultantly watching the windows of the adjacent office blocks rise into the air.

They settled about three feet below deck level, on a flat keel with a convenient access point by the starboard bridge. Dimly below they could hear trapped air bubbling from the retorts and fume cupboards in the laboratory, and a frothy stain spread across the water from a submerged window by one of the reagent benches.

From the typewriter in his cabin Kerans took a sheet of paper, pinned it firmly to the door of the galley. Bodkin appended his signature to the message, and the two men went out on to the deck again and lowered Kerans' catamaran into the water.

Paddling slowly, the outboard shipped, they glided off across the black water, soon disappearing among the dark blue shadows along the edge of the lagoon.

The down-draught from its blades fanning furiously across the swimming pool, tearing at the striped awning of the patio, the helicopter circled deafeningly over the penthouse, plunging and diving as it searched for a landing point. Kerans smiled to himself as he watched through the plastic vanes over the lounge windows, confident that the tottering pile of kerosene drums he and Bodkin had pyramided over the roof would safely deter the pilot. One or two of the drums toppled down on to the patio and splashed into the pool, and the helicopter veered away and then came in more slowly, hovering steadily.

The pilot swung the fuselage around so that the hatch door faced the lounge windows, and the hatless figure of Riggs appeared in the doorway, two of the orderlies holding on to him as he bellowed into an electric megaphone.

Beatrice Dahl ran across to Kerans from her observation post at the far end of the lounge, cupping her ears from the din.

"Robert, he's trying to talk to us!"

Kerans nodded, the Colonel's voice completely lost in the engine roar. Riggs finished and the helicopter leaned backwards and soared away across the lagoon, taking the noise and vibration with it.

Kerans put his arm around Beatrice's shoulders, the bare oiled skin smooth under his fingers. "Well, I think we have a pretty good idea what he was saying."

They went out on to the patio, waving up to Bodkin who had appeared from the lift-house and was straightening the drums. Standing by the rail, Kerans pointed to the yellow hull of the floating base moored by the Ritz in the furthest of the three lagoons.

After a futile attempt to re-float the station Riggs had set off at noon as planned, sending the cutter over to the apartment house where he assumed the two biologists were hiding. Finding the lift out of order and refusing the alternative of a twenty-storey climb up the stairway—already a few iguanas had made their homes on the lower landings—Riggs had finally tried to reach them with the helicopter. Balked there, he was now crashing the Ritz.

"Thank God he's left," Beatrice said fervently. "For some reason he really got on my nerves. All that stiff upper lip and dressing for dinner in the jungle—a total lack of adaptability."

"Riggs was all right," Kerans remarked quietly. "He'll probably get by." He glanced at the thermo-alarm he wore next to his wrist-watch. It was after 4.30, but the temperature was a hundred and twenty degrees, the sun beating against his skin like a fist. They joined Bodkin and went into the air-conditioned lounge.

Resuming the action conference interrupted by the helicopter, Kerans said: "You've got about a thousand gallons left in the roof tank, Bea, enough for three months—or let's say two, as we can expect it to get a lot hotter—and I recommend you to close down the rest of the apartment and move into here. You're on the north side of the patio so the lift-house will protect you from the heavy rains when they come in on the southerly storms. Ten to one the shutters and air-seals along the bedroom walls will be breached. What about food, Alan? How long will the stocks in the deep freeze last?"

Bodkin chuckled dryly. "Well, as most of the lambs, tongues in aspic have been eaten they now consist chiefly of bully beef, so you could say 'indefinitely'. However, if you're actually going to eat the stuff—six months. But I'd prefer iguana."

"No doubt the iguana would prefer us. All right then, that seems pretty fair. Alan will be over in the station until the level rises, and I'll be holding out at the Ritz. Anything else?"

Beatrice wandered away around the sofa towards the bar. "Yes, darling. Shut up. You're beginning to sound like Riggs. The military manner doesn't suit you."

Kerans threw her a mock salute and strolled over to look at the Ernst, while Bodkin gazed down at the jungle through the window. More and more the two scenes were becoming to resemble each other, and in turn the third nightscape each of them carried within his mind. They never discussed their dreams, the common zone of twilight where they moved at night like the phantoms in the Delvaux painting.

Beatrice had sat down in the sofa with her back to him, and shrewdly Kerans guessed that the present unity of the group would not be long maintained. Now that they had made their decision the bonds between them had already begun to fade, and it was not simply a matter of convenience that they would live apart. Much as he needed Beatrice Dahl, her personality intruded upon the absolute freedom he required for himself. By and large, each of them would have to pursue his or her own pathway through the time jungles, mark their own points of return. Although they would see one another occasionally, around the lagoons or at the testing station, their only true meeting ground would be in their dreams.

Split by an immense roar, the early morning silence over the lagoon shattered abruptly, and a tremendous blare of noise battered past the windows of the hotel suite. Kerans leapt from his bed, kicked back the mesh door on to the balcony in time to see a huge black-hulled hydroplane speed by around the lagoon, its two long stepped planes cleaving perfect slices of white spray. As the heavy wash slapped against the wall of the hotel, breaking up the colonies of water spiders and disturbing the bats nesting among the rotting logs, he caught a glimpse of a tall, broad-shouldered man in the cockpit, wearing a white helmet and jerkin, standing upright at the controls.

He drove the hydroplane with an easy nonchalant swagger, accelerating the two powerful propellor turbines mounted in front of him as the craft hit the broad swells across the lagoon, so that it plunged and dived like a power-boat wrestling through giant rollers, throwing up gales of rainbowing spray. The man rolled with the surging motion of the craft, his long legs supple and relaxed, like a chariotteer completely in command of a spirited team.

The silver studs of a cartridge belt flashed around his waist, and as he reached the far side of the lagoon there was a series of short explosions. Signal shells burst over the water into ragged red umbrellas, the fragments spitting down across the shore.

In a final lunge of energy, its engines screaming, the hydroplane swerved out of the lagoon and gunned away down the canal to the next lagoon, its wash thrashing at the foliage. Kerans gripped the balcony rail, watching the disturbed restless water of the lagoon trying to re-settle itself, the giant cryptograms and scale trees along the shore tossed and flurried by the still surging air. A thin pall of red vapour drifted away to the north, fading with the diminishing sounds of the hydroplane. The violent irruption of noise and energy, and the arrival of this strange white-suited figure, momentarily disconcerted Kerans.

In the six weeks since Riggs' departure he had lived almost alone in his penthouse suite at the hotel, immersing himself more and more deeply in the silent world of the surrounding jungle. The continued increase in temperature—the thermoalarm on the balcony now rang up a noon high of a hundred and forty degrees—and the enervating humidity made it almost impossible to leave the hotel after ten o'clock in the morning; the lagoons and the surrounding jungles were filled with fire until six o'clock, by when he was usually too tired to do anything but return to bed.

All day he sat by the screened windows of the suite, listening from the shadows to the shifting movement of the jungle. Already many of the buildings around the lagoon had disappeared beneath the proliferating vegetation; huge club-mosses and calamites blotted out the white rectangular faces, shading the lizards in their window lairs.

Beyond the lagoon the endless tides of silt had begun to accumulate in enormous glittering banks, here and there overtopping the shore-line, like the immense tipplings of some distant gold-mine. The light drummed against his brain, bathing the submerged levels below his consciousness, carrying him downwards into warm pellucid depths where the nominal realities of time and space ceased to exist. Guided by his dreams, he was moving backwards through the emergent past, through a succession of stranger landscapes, centred upon the lagoon, each of which seemed to represent one of his own

spinal levels. At times the circle of water was spectral and vibrant, at others slack and murky, the shore apparently formed of shale, like the dull metallic skin of a reptile. Yet again the soft beaches would glow invitingly with a glossy carmine sheen, the sky warm and limpid, the emptiness of the long stretches of sand total and absolute, filling him with an exquisite and tender anguish.

He longed for this descent through archaeopsychic time to reach its conclusion, repressing the knowledge that when it did the external world around him would have become unbearable.

Sometimes, he restlessly made a few entries in his botanical diary about the new plant forms, and during the first weeks called several times on Dr. Bodkin and Beatrice Dahl. But both were increasingly preoccupied with their own descents through total time. Bodkin had become lost in his private reverie, punting aimlessly about the narrow creeks in search for the submerged world of his childhood. However, with Beatrice, despite their superficial estrangement, there was an intact underlying union, a tacit awareness of their symbolic roles.

More signal shells burst over the distant lagoon, containing the station and Beatrice's apartment house, and Kerans shielded his eyes as the bright fire-balls studded the sky. A few seconds later, several miles away among the silt banks to the south, there was a series of answering bursts, faint puffs that soon dispersed.

So the stranger driving the hydroplane was not alone. At the prospect of this imminent invasion Kerans pulled himself together. The distance separating the answering signals was wide enough to indicate that there was more than one group, and that the hydroplane was merely a scout vehicle.

Sealing the mesh door behind him, he hurried back into the bedroom, pulling his jacket off the chair. Out of habit he went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, absently feeling the week-old stubble on his face. The hair was white as pearl, and with his ebony tan and blank eyes gave him the appearance of an elderly beachcombing tramp. A bucket-full of dingy water had leaked in from the wrecked still on the roof, and he scooped some out and splashed his face.

Using the metal-tipped boat hook to drive away two small iguanas idling on the jetty, he slid the catamaran into the water and cast off, the little outboard carrying him steadily through the sluggish swells. Huge clumps of algae stirred below the craft, and stick-beetle and water spider raced around its prows. It was a few minutes after seven o'clock, and the temperature was only eighty degrees, comparatively cool and pleasant, the air free of the enormous clouds of mosquito which would later be roused from their nests by the heat.

As he navigated the hundred-yard-long creek leading into the southern lagoon more signal rockets were exploding overhead, and he could hear the hydroplane zooming to and fro, occasionally glimpse the white-suited figure at its controls as it flashed past. Kerans cut the outboard at the entrance to the lagoon and glided quietly through the overhanging fern fronds, watching for water snakes disturbed from the branches by the surging wash.

Twenty-five yards along the shore he berthed the catamaran among the horsetails growing on the shelving roof of a department store, waded up the sloping concrete to a fire escape on the side of the adjacent building. He climbed the five storeys to the flat roof-top and lay down behind a low pediment, glancing up at the nearby bulk of Beatrice's apartment house.

The hydroplane was circling noisily by an inlet on the far side of the lagoon, the driver plunging it backwards and forward like a horseman reining his steed. More flares were going up, some only a quarter of a mile away. As he watched Kerans noticed a low but mounting roar, a harsh animal sound not unlike that emitted by the iguanas. It drew nearer, mingled with the drone of engines, followed by noise of vegetation being torn and buffeted. Sure enough, along the course followed by the inlet, the huge fern trees and calamites were flung down one after another, their branches waving as they fell like vanquished standards. The whole jungle was being torn apart. Doves of bats erupted into the air and scattered frantically across the lagoon, their screeching masked by the accelerating turbines of the hydroplane, and the exploding star-shells.

Abruptly, the water in the mouth of the inlet rose several feet into the air, what seemed to be an enormous log-jam crushed down it, tearing the vegetation away, and burst out into the lagoon. A miniature niagara of foaming water

cascaded outwards, impelled by the pressure of the tidal bore behind it, on which rode several square black-hulled craft like Colonel Riggs' cutter. Manned by a dozen dusky-skinned figures in white shorts and singlets, the scows jockeyed out towards the centre of the lagoon, the last of the star-shells still going up from their decks in the general melee and excitement.

Half-deafened by the noise, Kerans stared down at the vast swarm of long brown forms swimming powerfully through the seething water, their massive tails lashing the foam. By far the largest alligators he had seen, many of them over twenty-five feet long, they jostled together ferociously as they fought their way into the clear water, churning in a pack around the now stationary hydroplane. The white-suited man was standing in the open hatchway, hands on hips, gazing exultantly at this reptilian brood. He waved lazily at the crews of the three scows, then gestured in a wide circle at the lagoon, indicating that they would anchor there.

As his Negro lieutenants re-started their engines and drifted off towards the bank, he surveyed the surrounding buildings with a critical eye, his strong face raised almost jauntily to one side. The alligators congregated like hounds around their master, more and more joining the pack, cruising shoulder to shoulder in a clock-wise spiral, until at least two thousand were present, a massive group incarnation of reptilian evil.

Chapter Five

With a shout, the pilot swung back to his controls, the two thousand snouts lifting in recognition. The propellers kicked into life and lifted the hydroplane forward across the water. Its sharp planes ploughing straight across the hapless creatures in their path, it drove away towards the communicating creek into the next lagoon, the great mass of alligators surging along behind it. A few detached themselves and cruised off in pairs around the lagoon, ferreting among the submerged windows and driving off the iguanas who had come out to watch. Others glided among the buildings and took up their positions on the barely covered rooftops.

As the advancing armada headed towards the creek on his left, Kerans scrambled down the fire escape and splashed

down the slope to the catamaran. Before he could reach it the heavy wash set up by the hydroplane had rocked the craft adrift and it floated off into the oncoming mass. Within a few seconds it was engulfed, upended by the press of alligators fighting to get into the creek and cut to pieces in their snapping jaws.

A large caiman bringing up the rear spotted Kerans waist-deep among the horsetails and veered towards him, its eyes steadying. Quickly Kerans retreated up the slope, slipping once to his shoulders, reached the fire escape as the reptile lumbered out of the shallows on its short hooked legs and lunged at his leaping feet.

Panting, Kerans leaned on the rail, looking down at its cold unblinking eyes, regarding him dispassionately.

"You're a well-trained watchdog," he told it ungrudgingly. He eased a loose brick from the wall and launched it with both hands at the caiman's snout, grinning as it bellowed and backed off, snapping irritably at the horsetails and a few drifting spars of the catamaran.

After half an hour, and a few minor duels with the retreating iguanas, he managed to cross the intervening two hundred yards of shoreline and reach Beatrice's apartment house. She met him as he stepped out of the lift, wide-eyed with alarm.

"Robert, what's happening?" She put her hands on his shoulders and pressed her head against his damp shirt. "Have you seen the alligators? There are thousands of them!"

"Seen them—I was nearly eaten by one on your doorstep." Kerans released himself from her and hurried over to the window, pushed back the plastic vanes. The hydroplane had entered the central lagoon and was circling it at speed, the shoal of alligators following in its wake, those at the tail breaking off to station themselves at points around the shore. At least thirty or forty had remained in the lagoon below, and were cruising about slowly in small patrols, occasionally swerving on a careless iguana.

"Those devilish things must be their watchguards," Kerans decided. "Like a tame troupe of tarantulas. Nothing better, when you come to think of it."

Beatrice stood beside him, nervously fingering the collar of the faded Paisley shirt she had pulled on over her swim-suit.

Her face was without make-up, and she wore her hair piled loosely on top of her head.

"But who are they, Robert? That man in the speed-boat frightens me. I wish Colonel Riggs was here."

"He'll be a thousand miles away by now, if he hasn't already reached Byrd. Don't worry, Bea. They may look a piratical crew, but there's nothing we can give them."

A large three-decker paddle-boat, paddles set fore and aft, had entered the lagoon and was slowly moving over to the three scows drawn up a few yards from where Riggs' base had been moored. It was loaded with gear and cargo, decks crammed with large bales and canvas-swathed machinery, so that there was only six inches of freeboard amidships.

Kerans guessed that this was the group's depot ship, and that they were engaged, like most of the other freebooters still wandering through the Equatorial lagoons and archipelagoes, in pillaging the drowned cities, reclaiming the heavy specialised machinery such as electrical power generators and switch-gear that had been perforce abandoned by the government. Nominally such looting was highly penalised, but in fact the authorities were only too eager to pay a generous price for any salvage.

"Look!"

Beatrice gripped Kerans' elbow. She pointed down at the testing station, where the rumpled, shaggy-haired figure of Dr. Bodkin stood on the roof, waving slowly at the men on the bridge of the paddle-boat. One of them, a bare-chested Negro in white slacks and a white peaked cap, began to shout back through a hailer.

Kerans shrugged. "Alan's right. We've everything to gain by showing ourselves. If we help them they'll soon push off and leave us alone."

Beatrice hesitated, but Kerans took her arm. The hydro-plane, now free of its entourage, was crossing the central lagoon on its return, leaping lightly through the water on a beautiful wake of foam.

"Come on, if we get down to the jetty in time, he'll probably give us a lift."

His handsome saturnine face regarding them with a mixture of suspicion and amused contempt, Strangman lounged back under the cool awning that shaded the poop deck of the depot

ship. He had changed into a crisp white suit, the silk-like surface of which reflected the gilt plate of his high-backed Renaissance throne, presumably dredged from some Venetian or Florentine lagoon, and invested his strange personality with an almost magical aura.

"Your motives seem so complex, Doctor," he remarked to Kerans. "But perhaps you've given up hope of understanding them yourself. We shall label them the total beach syndrome and leave it at that."

He snapped his fingers at the steward standing in the shadows behind him and selected an olive from the tray of small chow. Beatrice, Kerans and Bodkin sat in a semicircle on the low couches, alternately chilled and roasted as the erratic air-conditioner above them varied its perimeter. Outside, half an hour before noon, the lagoon was a bowl of fire, the scattered light almost masking the tall apartment house on the opposite bank. The jungle was motionless in the immense heat, the alligators hiding in whatever shade they could find.

Nonetheless several of Strangman's men were messing about in one of the scows, unloading some heavy diving equipment, under the direction of a huge hunchbacked Negro in a pair of green cotton shorts. Now and then he took off his eye-patch to bellow abuse at them, and the mingled grunts and curses drifted across the steaming air.

"But tell me, Doctor," Strangman pressed, apparently dissatisfied with Kerans' answers, "when do you finally propose to leave?"

Kerans hesitated, wondering whether to invent a date. After waiting an hour for Strangman to change, he had offered their greetings to him and tried to explain why they were still there. However, Strangman seemed unable to take the explanation seriously, swinging abruptly from amusement at their naivety to sharp suspicion.

"We haven't really considered the possibility," Kerans said. "I think we all hope to stay on indefinitely. We have small stocks of supplies."

"But my dear man," Strangman remonstrated, "the temperature will soon be up to nearly two hundred degrees. The entire planet is rapidly returning to the Mesozoic Period."

"Precisely," Dr. Bodkin cut in, rousing himself for a moment from his deep introspection. "And insofar as we are

part of the planet, a piece of the main, we too are returning. This is our zone of transit, here we are re-assimilating our own biological pasts. There is no ulterior motive, Strangman."

"Of course not, Doctor, I completely respect your sincerity." Shifts of mood seemed to cross and re-cross Strangman's face, making him look in turn irritable, amiable, abstracted and speculative. He listened to an air-line pumping from the scow, then asked: "Dr. Bodkin, did you live in London as a child? You must have many sentimental memories to recapture." He added: "Or are the only claims you recognise pre-uterine ones?"

Kerans looked up, noting that Strangman was not only watching Bodkin shrewdly, but also waiting for any reaction from himself and Beatrice.

But Bodkin gestured vaguely. "No, I'm afraid I remember nothing of it. The immediate past is of no interest to me."

"What a pity," Strangman rejoined archly. "The trouble with you people is that you've been here for thirty million years and your perspectives are all wrong. You miss so much of the transitory beauty of life. I'm fascinated by the immediate past—the treasures of the Triassic compare pretty unfavourably with those of the closing years of the Second Millenium."

Over his shoulder he rapped a short command at the steward, then sat frowning to himself. Kerans realised that the skin of his face and his hands was uncannily white, devoid altogether of any pigmentation. Keran's heavy sunburn, like that of Beatrice and Dr. Bodkin, made him virtually indistinguishable from the remainder of the crew, and the subtle distinctions between the mulattos and quadroons had vanished. Strangman alone retained his original paleness, the effect emphasised by the white suit he had chosen.

The bare-chested Negro in the peaked cap appeared, sweat rilling across his powerful muscles. His manner was deferential and observant, and Kerans wondered how Strangman managed to maintain his authority over the crew, and why they accepted his harsh, callous tone.

Strangman introduced the Negro curtly. "This is the Admiral, my chief whip. If I'm not around when you want me, deal with him." He stood up. "Before you leave, let me take you on a brief tour of my treasure ship." He extended an arm gallantly to Beatrice, who took it timorously, his eyes glinting and rapacious.

Four decks below, they entered the main storehold, a dim stifling cavern packed with crates, the floor strewn with sawdust. The Admiral and another sailor followed them closely, continually hosing them with ice-cold air. Strangman snapped his fingers and the Admiral quickly began to pull away the canvas wrappings.

In the thin light Kerans could just see the glimmering outlines of a huge ornamented altarpiece, fitted with elaborate scroll-work and towering dolphin candelabra, topped by a neo-classical proscenium which would have covered a small house. Next to it stood a dozen pieces of statuary, both bronze and marble, all of the Renaissance, stacks of heavy gilt frames propped against them. Beyond these were several smaller altar-pieces and triptyches, an intact pulpit in panelled gold, three large equestrian statues, a few strands of sea-weed still entwined in the horses' manes, several pairs of enormous cathedral doors, embossed in gold and silver, and a large tiered fountain. The metal shelves around the sides of the hold were loaded with smaller bric a brac; votive urns, goblets, shields and salvers, pieces of decorative armour, ceremonial inkstands and the like.

Still holding Beatrice's arm, Strangman gestured expansively a few yards ahead. Kerans heard him say 'Sistine Chapel' but Bodkin muttered: "Aesthetically most of this is rubbish, picked for the gold content alone."

Kerans nodded, watching Strangman in his white suit, the bare-legged Beatrice beside him. Suddenly he remembered the Delvaux painting, with its tuxedoed skeletons. Strangman's chalk-white face was like a skull, and he had something of the skeleton's jauntiness. For no reason he began to feel an intense loathing for the man, his hostility more generalised than personal.

"Well, Kerans, what do you think of them?" Strangman pivoted at the end of the aisle and swung back, barking at the Admiral to cover the exhibits again. "Impressed, Doctor?"

Kerans managed to take his eyes off Strangman's face and glanced at the looted relics.

"They're like bones," he said flatly.

Baffled, Strangman shook his head. "Bones? What on earth are you talking about? Kerans, you're insane! Bones, Good God!"

As he let out a martyred groan, the Admiral took up the refrain, first saying the word quietly to himself, then repeating it more and more rapidly, his broad face gibbering with laughter. The other crew-man joined in, and together they began to chant it out, convulsed over the fire hose.

"Bones ! Yes, man, dem's all bones ! Dem bones dem bones dem . . . !"

In annoyance Strangman rushed forward, pressed the palm of his hand in Keran's back and propelled him along the aisle out of the hold. Five minutes later, as they drove off in one of the scows, the Admiral and five or six other members of the crew lined the rail, still chanting and dancing. Strangman had regained his humour, and stood coolly in his white suit, detached from the others, waving ironically.

Chapter Six

During the next two weeks, as the southern horizon became increasingly darkened by the approaching rain-clouds, Kerans saw Strangman frequently. Usually he would be driving his hydroplane at speed around the lagoons, his white lounge suit exchanged for overalls and helmet, supervising the work of the salvage teams. One scow, with half a dozen men, was working in each of the three lagoons, the divers methodically exploring the sunken buildings. Occasionally the placid routines of descent and pump would be interrupted by the sounds of rifle fire as an alligator venturing too near the divers was despatched.

Sitting in the darkness in his hotel suite, Kerans was far away from the lagoon, content to let Strangman dive for his loot as long as he would soon leave. More and more the dreams had begun to encroach on his waking life, his conscious mind becoming increasingly drained and withdrawn. The single plane of time on which Strangman and his men existed seemed so transparent as to have a negligible claim to reality. Now and then, when Strangman came to call on him, he would emerge for a few minutes on to this tenuous plane, but the real centre of his consciousness was elsewhere.

Curiously, after his initial irritation, Strangman had developed a sneaking liking for Kerans. The biologist's quiet, angular mind was a perfect target for Strangman's dry humour. At times he would subtly mimic Kerans, earnestly taking his

arm during one of their dialogues and saying in a pious voice: "You know, Kerans, leaving the sea two hundred million years ago may have been a deep trauma from which we've never recovered . . ."

On another occasion he sent two of his men over in a skiff to the lagoon; on one of the largest buildings on the opposite bank they painted in letters thirty feet high:

TIME ZONE

Kerans took this banter in good part, ignoring it when the diver's lack of success made it more severe. Sinking backward through the past, he waited patiently for the coming of the rain.

"Kerans!"

Roused by the deep blare of the hydroplane approaching the landing stage, Kerans managed to climb out of bed by the time Strangman climbed the stairs.

Chuckling his helmet down on to the floor, Strangman produced a decanter of hot black coffee and a tinned Stilton cheese green with age.

"A present for you." He examined Kerans' dulled eyes with an amiable frown. "Well, how are things in deep time?"

Kerans sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for the booming of the phantom jungles in his mind to fade. Like an endless shallows, the residues of the dreams stretched away below the surface of the reality around him. "What brings you here?" he asked flatly.

Strangman put on an expression of deep injury.

"Kerans, I *like* you. You keep forgetting that." He turned up the volume of the air-conditioner, smiling at Kerans, who gazed watchfully at the wry, perverted leer. "Actually I have another motive—I want you to have dinner with me tonight. Don't start shaking your head. I have to keep coming here, it's time I returned your hospitality. Beatrice and old Bodkin will be there, it should be pretty swagger—fire-work displays, bongo drums *and* a surprise."

"What exactly?"

"You'll see. Something really spectacular, believe me, I don't do things by halves. I'd have those 'gators dancing on the tips of their tails if I wanted to." He nodded solemnly. "Kerans, you're going to be impressed. And it may even do you some good mentally, stop this crazy time machine of

yours." His mood changed again, becoming distant and abstracted. "But I mustn't poke fun at you, Kerans, I couldn't bear a tenth of the personal responsibility you've shouldered. The tragic loneliness, for example, and those haunted Triassic swamps." He picked a copy of Donne's poems off the air-conditioner and extemporised a line: "World within world, each man an island unto himself, swimming through seas of archipelagoes . . ."

Fairly certain that he was fooling, Kerans asked: "How's the diving going?"

"Frankly, not very well. The city's too far north for much to have been left. But we've discovered a few interesting things. You'll see tonight."

As he rode across the lagoon to the paddle-ship later that evening, Kerans speculated on the probable nature of Strangman's 'surprise', hoping that it would not be some elaborate practical joke. The effort of shaving off his beard and putting on a white dinner jacket had tired him, and he doubted if he would have enough energy left to make small talk with Dr. Bodkin and Beatrice. He had seen neither of them since their joint first meeting with Strangman, though every evening the latter drove over in his hydroplane to Beatrice's apartment house. What success he had Kerans could only guess, but Strangman's references to her—"These women exist on too many levels" or "She keeps talking about you, Robert, confound her"—suggested a negative response.

Some sort of preparations were obviously afoot in the lagoon. The depot ship had been moored about fifty yards from shore, strung with awnings and coloured lights, and the two remaining scows were working systematically along the banks, driving the alligators into the central lagoon.

Kerans pointed to a big caiman thrashing about in a circle of boat hooks. "What's on the menu tonight—roast alligator?"

The giant hunch-backed mulatto at the helm of the scow—known to Strangman as Big Caesar—shrugged with studied vagueness. "Strang' got a big show tonight, Mistah Kerans, a real big show. You see."

Strangman met each one as they arrived at the head of the gangway. In high spirits, he managed a sustained mood of charm and good cheer, complimenting Beatrice elaborately on

her appearance. She wore a full-length blue brocade ball dress, the turquoise mascara around her eyes making her look like some exotic bird of paradise. Even Bodkin had managed to trim his beard and salvage a respectable linen jacket an old piece of crepe around his neck a ragged concession to a black tie. Like Kerans, however, they both seemed glazed and remote, joining in the conversation over dinner automatically.

Throughout the meal Strangman supervised the succession of wines, taking advantage of his absences from the table to confer with the Admiral. With the final brandies before them Strangman sat down apparently for the last time, winking broadly at Kerans. Two of the scows had moved over to the inlet by the far side of the lagoon, and the third took up its position in the centre, from where it released a small fire-work display.

The last sunlight still lay over the water, but had faded sufficiently for the bright catherine wheels and rockets to flicker and dazzle, their sharp explosions etched clearly against the crepuscular sky. The smile on Strangman's face grew broader and broader, until he lay back on his chesterfield grinning soundlessly to himself, the red and green flashes illuminating his saturnine features.

Uncomfortably, Kerans leaned forward to ask him when their surprise would materialise, but Strangman anticipated him.

"Well, haven't you noticed? Beatrice, Dr. Bodkin? You three are slow. Come out of deep time for a moment."

Puzzled, Kerans searched the sky and the lagoon. The dusk had come in rather more quickly than he expected, the faces of the buildings opposite sinking into shadow. At the same time the sky remained clear and visible in the sunset, the tops of the surrounding vegetation brilliantly tinted.

A low drumming sounded somewhere in the distance, the air-pumps that had worked all day and whose noise had been masked by the pyrotechnic display. Around the ship the water had become curiously slack and lifeless, the low swells that usually disturbed it absent. Wondering whether an exhibition of underwater swimming had been arranged for a troupe of trained alligators, he peered down at the surface.

"Alan! Look, for heaven's sake! Beatrice, can you see?" Kerans kicked back his chair and leapt to the rail,

pointing down in amazement at the water. "The level's going down!"

Looming just below the dark pellucid surface were the dim rectangular outlines of the submerged buildings, their open windows like empty eyes in enormous drowned skulls. Only a few feet from the surface, they drew closer, emerging from the depths like an immense intact Atlantis. First a dozen, then a score of buildings appeared to view, their cornices and fire escapes clearly visible through the thinning refracting glass of the water. Most of them were only four or five storeys high, part of a district of small shops and offices enclosed by the taller buildings that had formed the perimeter of the lagoon.

Fifty yards away the first of the roofs broke surface, a blunted rectangle smothered with weeds and algae across which slithered a few desperate fish. Immediately half a dozen others appeared around it, already roughly delineating a narrow street. The upper line of windows emerged, water spilling from their ledges, fucus draped from the straggling wires that sagged across the roadways.

Already the lagoon had vanished. As they sank slowly downwards, settling into what seemed to be a large open square, they were now looking across a diffuse straggle of rooftops, punctuated by eroded chimneys and spires, the flat sheet of the surface transformed into a jungle of cubist blocks, at its boundaries merging into the higher ground of the enveloping vegetation. What remained of the water had formed into distinct channels, dark and sombre, eddying away around corners and into narrow alleyways.

"Robert, stop it! It's horrible!" Kerans felt Beatrice seize his arm, her long blue nails biting through the fabric. She gazed out at the emerging city, an expression of revulsion on her tense face, physically repelled by the sharp acrid smells of the exposed water-weeds and algae, the damp barnacled forms of rusting litter. Veils of scum draped from the criss-crossing telegraph wires and tilting neon signs, and a thin coating of silt cloaked the faces of the buildings, turning the once limpid beauty of the underwater city into a drained and festering sewer.

For a moment Kerans fought to free his mind, grappling with this total inversion of his normal world, unable to accept the logic of the rebirth before him. First he wondered

whether there had been a total climatic reversal that was shrinking the formerly expanding seas, draining the submerged cities. If so, he would have to make his way back to this new present, or be marooned millions of years away on the beach of some lost Triassic lagoon. But deep within his mind the great masked sun pounded dimly with a strength still undiminished, and beside him he heard Bodkin mutter:

"Those pumps are powerful. The water's going down by a good two or three feet a minute. We're not far from the bottom now. The whole thing's fantastic!"

Laughter rocked out into the darkening air as Strangman rolled about mirthfully on the chesterfield, dabbing his eyes with a napkin. Released from the tension of staging the spectacle he was now exulting in the three bewildered faces at the rail. On the bridge above him the Admiral watched with dry amusement, the fading light across his bare chest. Two or three men below were taking in the mooring lines, holding the orientation of the ship in the square.

The two scows which had moved over to the creek mouth during the fire work display were floating behind a massive boom, and a foaming mass of water poured from the twin vents of a huge pumping system. Then the roof-tops obscured their view across the interval, and the people on the deck were looking up at the blanched buildings of the square. Only fifteen or twenty feet of water remained, and a hundred yards away down one of the side streets they could see the third scow wending tentatively below the trailing wires.

Strangman controlled himself and came over to the rail. "Perfect, don't you agree, Dr. Bodkin? What a jest, a really superb spectacle! Come on, Doctor, don't look so piqued, congratulate me! It wasn't too easy to arrange."

Bodkin nodded and moved away along the rail, his face still stunned. Kerans asked: "But how did you seal off the perimeter? There's no continuous wall around the lagoon."

"There is now, Doctor. I thought you were the expert in marine biology. The fungi growing in the swamp mud outside consolidated the entire mass, for the last week there's only been one point of influx, took us five minutes to dam it up."

He gazed out brightly at the emerging streets in the dim light around them, the humped backs of cars and buses appearing

through the surface. Giant anemones and star-fish flopped limply in the shadows, collapsing kelp straggled out of windows.

Numbly, Bodkin said: "Leicester Square."

His laughter vanishing, Strangman swung on him, his eyes peering eagerly at the neon-covered porticos of the hulks of former cinemas and theatres.

"So you *do* know your way around here, Doctor! A pity you couldn't have helped us before, when we were getting nowhere." He slammed the rail with an oath, jarring Kerans' elbow. "By God, though, we're really in business now!" With a snarl he flung himself away from them, kicking back the dining table, shouting up at the Admiral.

Beatrice watched him disappear below with alarm, a slender hand on her throat. "Robert, he's insane. What are we going to do—he'll drain all the lagoons."

Kerans looked up at the round bulk of the testing station, poised on the cinema behind them like an enormous boulder on the edge of a cliff. Apparently eighty to ninety feet higher, the tall buildings around the lagoon perimeter now cut off half the sky, enclosing them in a dim canyon-floor world.

"It doesn't matter that much," Kerans temporised. He steadied her against his arm, as the ship touched bottom and rolled slightly, crushing a small car under the port bow. "When he's finished stripping the stores and museums they'll leave. Anyway, the rain-storms will be here in a week or two."

Beatrice cleared her throat distastefully, wincing as the first bats flickered among the roof-tops, darting from one dripping cave to another. "But it's all so hideous. I can't believe that anyone ever lived here. It's like some imaginary city of hell. Robert, I *need* the lagoon."

"Well, we could leave and move south across the silt flats. What do you think, Alan?"

Bodkin shook his head slowly, still staring out blankly at the darkened buildings around the square. "You two go, I must stay here."

The streets had almost been drained. The approaching scow ran aground on the pavement, pushed off again and then stuck finally on a traffic island. Led by Big Caesar, the three-man crew jumped down into the waist-deep water and waded noisily towards the depot ship, splashing water excitedly into the open shop-fronts.

With a jolt the paddle-ship settled itself firmly on the bottom, cheers and shouts going up from Strangman and the rest of the crew as they fended off the snapping overhead wires and tilted telegraph poles. A small dinghy was thrown into the water, and to a chorus of fists pounding a drum-beat on the rail the Admiral rowed Strangman across the shallow water to a fountain in the centre of the square. Here Strangman debarked, pulled a flare pistol from a pocket of his dinner jacket and with an exultant shout began to fire salvo after salvo of coloured star-shells into the air overhead.

Chapter Seven

Half an hour later Beatrice, Kerans and Dr. Bodkin were able to walk out into the streets. Huge pools of water still lay about everywhere, leaking from the ground floors of the buildings, but they were little more than two or three feet deep. There were clear stretches of pavement over a hundred yards long, and many of the further streets were completely drained. Dying fish and marine plants expired in the centre of the roadways, and huge banks of black sludge were silted up into the gutters and over the pavement, but fortunately the escaping waters had cut long pathways through them.

Strangman at their head, racing along in his white suit, firing star-shells into the dark streets, the crew charged off in a bellowing pack, those in the front balancing a rum keg on their upturned palms, the others brandishing an assortment of bottles, machetes and guitars. A few derisive shouts of 'Mistah Bones' faded around Kerans as he helped Beatrice down off the gangway, and then the trio were left alone in the silence by the huge stranded paddle-ship.

Glancing up uncertainly at the high distant ring of the jungle looming out of the darkness like the encircling lip of a volcano cone, Kerans led the way across the pavement to the nearest buildings. They stood in the entrance of one of the huge cinemas, sea urchins and cucumbers flickering faintly across the tiled floor, sand dollars flowering in the former ticket booth.

Beatrice gathering her skirt in one hand, they moved slowly down the line of cinemas, past cafes and amusement arcades, patronised now only by the molluscs and bivalves. At the

first corner they turned away from the sounds of revelry coming from the other side of the square, and walked westwards down the dim dripping canyons. A few star-shells continued to explode overhead, the delicate glass sponges in the doorways glowing softly as they reflected the pink and blue light.

"Coventry Street, Haymarket . . ." Kerans read off the rusting street signs. They stepped quickly into a doorway as Strangman and his pack charged back across the square in a blaze of light and noise, machetes slashing at the rotting boards over the shop-fronts.

"Let's hope they find something that satisfies them," Bodkin murmured. He searched the crowded skyline, as if looking for the deep black water that had once covered the buildings.

For several hours they wandered like forlorn elegant ghosts through narrow streets, occasionally meeting one of the roistering crew, ambling drunkenly along the centre of the roadway with the remnants of some fading garment in one hand, a machete in the other. A few small fires had been started in the centre of the street junctions, little groups of two or three men warming themselves over the flaring tinder.

Avoiding these, the trio blundered into a winding cul de sac, managed to step back in time as a large caiman lunged at them from a shallow pool. Darting between the rusting shells of cars, they regained the open street, the alligator racing behind them. It paused by a lamp post on the pavement edge, tail whipping slowly, jaws flexing, and Kerans pulled Beatrice by the arm. They broke into a run and had covered ten yards when Bodkin slipped and fell heavily into a bank of silt.

"Alan! Hurry!" Kerans started to go back for him, the caiman's head pivoting towards them.

Suddenly there was a roar of gunfire, the flames stabbing across the roadway. Flares held above their heads, a group of men appeared around a corner. In front of them was the white-faced figure of Strangman, followed by the Admiral and Big Caesar, shot-guns at their shoulders.

Strangman's eyes glittered in the flare light. He made a small bow towards Beatrice, then saluted Kerans. Its spine shattered, the alligator thrashed impotently in the gutter, revealing its yellow underbelly, and Big Caesar drew his machete and began to hack at its head.

Strangman watched it with evil pleasure. "Loathsome brute," he commented, then pulled from his pocket a huge rhinestone necklace, still encrusted with algae, and held it out to Beatrice.

"For you, my dear." Deftly, he strung the strands around her neck, regarding the effect with pleasure. The entwined weeds among the sparkling stones against the white skin of her breast made her look like some naiad of the deep. "And all the other jewels of this dead sea."

With a flourish he was off again, the flares vanishing in the darkness with the shouts of his men, leaving them alone in silence with the white jewels and the decapitated alligator.

During the next days events proceeded to even greater madness. Completely disorientated, Kerans would wander alone through the dark streets at night—by day it became unbearably hot in the labyrinth of alleyways—unable to tear himself away from his memories of the old lagoon, yet at the same time locked fast to the empty streets and gutted buildings.

The great sun beating in his mind almost drowned out the sounds of the looting and revelry, the roars of explosives and shotguns. Like a blind man he stumbled in and out of the old arcades and entrances, his white dinner suit stained and grimy, jeered at by sailors as they charged by him, playfully buffeting his shoulders. At midnight he would sit beside Strangman at his parties in the square, hiding back under the shadow of the paddle-ship, watching the dancing and listening to the beat of the drums and guitars, overlaid in his mind by the insistent pounding of the black sun.

Bodkin had disappeared somewhere, presumably to the lagoons in the south, but always Beatrice would join Strangman at his parties. She sat numbly beside him in her blue evening dress, her hair studded with half a dozen of the tiaras Strangman had looted from the old jewellery vaults, her breasts smothered under a mass of glittering chains and crescents, like a mad queen in a horror drama.

Wilder now than Kerans had ever seen him, Strangman danced about the camp fires, sometimes forcing Kerans to join him, inciting the bongo drummers to ever faster rhythms. Then, exhausted, he would slump back on his divan, his thin white face like blue chalk.

Leaning on one elbow, he stared sombrely at Kerans, squatting on a cushion behind him.

"Do you know why they fear me, Kerans? The Admiral, Big Caesar and the others. Let me tell you my secret." Then in a whisper: "Because they think I'm dead."

In a spasm of laughter, he rocked back into the divan, shaking helplessly. "Oh, my God, Kerans. What's the matter with you two? Come out of that trance." He looked up as Big Caesar approached. "Yes, what is it? A special song for Doctor Kerans? Capital! Did you hear that, Doctor? Let's go then, with *The Ballad of Mistah Bones!*"

Clearing his throat, with much prancing and gesticulation, the big negro began, his voice deep and guttural.

*"Mistah Bones, he loves dried men,
Got himself a banana girl; three prophets sly,
She played him all crazy, drowned him in the snake wine,
Never heard so many swamp birds,
That old boss alligator.*

*Rum Bones, he went skull fishing,
Down off Angel Creek, where the dried men run,
Took out his turtle stone, waited for the chapel boat,
Three prophets landing,
Some bad joss.*

*Rum Bones, he saw the loving girl,
Gave his turtle stone for two bananas,
He had that banana girl like a hot mangrove;
Prophets saw him,
No dried men coming for Rum Bones.*

*Rum Bones, he danced for that loving girl,
Built a banana house for her loving bed——"*

With a sudden shout, Strangman leapt from the divan, raced past Big Caesar into the centre of the square, pointing up at the perimeter wall of the lagoon high above them. Outlined against the setting sky was the small square figure of Dr. Bodkin, picking his way slowly across the wooden barrage that held back the creek waters outside. Unaware that he had been spotted by the party below, he carried a small wooden box in one hand, a faint light fizzing from a trailing wire.

Wide awake, Strangman bellowed: "Admiral, Big Caesar, get him, he's got a bomb!"

In a wild scramble the party dissolved, everyone with the exception of Beatrice and Kerans raced off across the square. Shotguns slammed left and right, and Kerans saw Bodkin pause uncertainly, the fuse wire sparking about his legs. Then he turned and began to edge back along the barrage.

Kerans jumped to his feet and ran after the others. As he reached the perimeter wall star-shells were bursting into the air, spitting magnesium fragments across the roadway. Strangman and the Admiral were leaping up a fire escape, Big Caesar's shotgun slamming out over their heads. Bodkin had left his bomb in the centre of the dam and was racing away over the rooftops.

Straddling the final ledge, Strangman leapt up on to the barrage, in a dozen strides reached the bomb and kicked it out into the centre of the creek. As the splash died away a cheer of approval went up from those below. Catching his breath, Strangman buttoned his jacket, then slipped a short-barrelled .38 from his shoulder holster. Whipping on the cries of his followers, he set out after Bodkin as he scaled his way painfully up the pontoon of the testing station.

Kerans listened numbly to the final shots, then walked slowly back to the square, where Beatrice still sat on her heap of cushions. As he reached her he heard the footsteps behind him slowing menacingly, a strange silence fall over the pack.

He swung round to see Strangman saunter forward, a thin smirk on his face. Big Caesar and the Admiral were at his shoulder, their shotguns exchanged for machetes. The rest of the crew fanned out in a loose semi-circle.

"That was rather stupid of Bodkin, don't you think, Doctor? Dangerous too, as a matter of fact. We could damn nearly have all been drowned." Strangman paused a few feet from Kerans, eyeing him moodily. "You knew Bodkin pretty well, I'm surprised you didn't anticipate that. I don't know whether I should take any more chances with mad biologists."

He was about to gesture to Big Caesar when Beatrice jumped to her feet, rushed over to Strangman.

"Strangman! For heaven's sake, one's enough! Stop it, we won't hurt you! Look, you can have all these."

With a wrench she unclasped the mass of necklaces, tore the tiaras from her hair and flung them at Strangman. Snarling

with anger, Strangman kicked them into the gutter, and Big Caesar stepped past her, the machete swinging upward.

Before Kerans could start to run something seized him from behind and pulled him backwards off balance. Recovering his foothold on the damp pavement, he heard Strangman shout in surprise and saw a group of brown-uniformed men step rapidly from the shadows, their rifles at their hips. At their head was the trim, brisk figure of Colonel Riggs.

"Okay, Strangman, that will do very nicely." He rapped his baton across Big Caesar's chest and forced him back into the others.

Kerans felt someone take his elbow. He looked round at the solicitous beak-like face of Corporal Macready, a sub-machine-gun in the crook of his arm. "You all right, sir? Sorry to jerk you about like that. Looks as if you've been having a bit of a party here."

By ten the next morning Riggs had stabilised the situation and was able to see Kerans informally. His headquarters were in the testing station, with a commanding view over the streets below, and particularly of the paddle-ship in the square. Stripped of their weapons, Strangman and his crew sat around in the shade under the hull, supervised by a light machine-gun manned by Macready and two of his men.

"I guessed Strangman was here," Riggs explained. "One of our aerial patrols reported seeing the hydroplane and I reckoned you might have a little trouble with him if you were still hanging on. The pretext of trying to reclaim the testing station was a fair one." He sat on the edge of the desk, watching the helicopter circle the rooftops, occasionally diving into the open streets. "Pretty grim down there, isn't it. Damn shame about old Bodkin. He really should have come north with us."

Kerans nodded, looking across the office at the machete scars freshly sliced into the woodwork around the door, part of the damage gratuitously inflicted on the furniture in the station after Bodkin's death. Most of the mess had been cleaned up, his body flown out to Riggs' tender in the next lagoon. "Why don't you arrest Strangman?" he asked.

"Because there's absolutely nothing I can hold him on. Legally, as he full well knows, he was absolutely entitled to defend himself against Bodkin, kill him if necessary. Remember the Reclaimed Lands Act and the Dykes Maintenance

Regulations. I know Strangman's a nasty piece of work—with that white skin and his alligators—but strictly speaking he deserves a medal for pumping out the lagoon. If he complains I'll have a job explaining that machine-gun down there. Believe me, Robert, if I'd arrived five minutes later and found you chopped to bits Strangman could have claimed that you were an accomplice and I'd have been able to do nothing. He's a clever fellow."

"What about the looting?"

Riggs shrugged. "Apart from a few trinkets filched from an old Woolworths he's taken nothing that couldn't be put down to natural exuberance on the part of his men. The only reason he's sitting quiet now is that he knows he's got the law on his side. If he hadn't there'd be a battle royal going on." He broke off, peering shrewdly at Kerans. "You look all in, Robert. Are you still getting these dreams?"

"Now and then." Kerans shuddered. "The last few days have been insane here. It's difficult to describe Strangman—he's like a white devil out of a voodoo cult. I can't accept the idea that he'll go scot free. When are you going to re-flood the lagoon?"

"Re-flood the——?" Riggs repeated, shaking his head in bewilderment. "Robert, you really are out of touch. The sooner you get away from here the better. The last thing I intend to do is re-flood the lagoon. If anybody tries I'll personally blow his head off. Reclaiming land, particularly an urban area like this in a former capital city, is a Class A1 priority. If Strangman is serious about pumping out the next two lagoons he'll not only get a free pardon but a governor generalship to boot." He looked down through the window. "Here he comes now, I wonder what's on his evil little mind."

Kerans went over to Riggs, averting his eyes from the maze of festering yellow rooftops. "Colonel, you've got to flood it again, laws or no laws. Have you been down in those streets, they're obscene and hideous! It's a nightmare world that's dead and finished, you're resurrecting a corpse! After two or three days here you'll——"

Riggs swung away from the desk, cutting Kerans off. An element of impatience crept into his voice. "I don't intend to stay here for three days," he snapped curtly. "Don't worry, I'm not suffering from any crazy obsession about these lagoons,

flooded or otherwise. We're leaving first thing tomorrow, all of us."

Puzzled, Kerans said: "But you can't leave, Colonel. Strangmen will still be here."

"Of course he will. Do you think that paddle-boat has got wings? There's no reason for *him* to leave, if he thinks he can take the big heat waves coming and the rainstorms. You never know, if he gets a few of these big buildings refrigerated he may be able to. But there's nothing for me to stay for—I can't move the station now, but it's a fair loss. Anyway, you and the Dahl girl need a rest. And a brain-lift. This time you're really coming with us."

Kerans nodded, pulling himself together as a firm rap sounded on the door.

"Yes, Colonel," he said carefully, "I'm coming with you."

Chapter Eight

Crouched down in a small office two floors above the barrage, Kerans listened to the music playing amid the lights on the top deck of the depot ship. Propelled by two junior members of the crew, the big paddles rotated slowly, their blades dividing the coloured lights and swinging them up across the sky. Seen from above, the white awnings resembled the marquee of a fairground, a brilliant focus of noise and activity in the darkened square.

As a concession to Strangman, Riggs had joined him at this farewell party. A bargain had been struck between the two leaders; earlier the machine-gun had been withdrawn and the lower level placed out of bounds to the Colonel's men. All day Strangman and his pack had roved the streets, and the random sounds of looting and firing echoed to and fro. Even now, as the Colonel and Beatrice Dahl climbed the fire escape up to the testing station, fighting had broken out on deck and bottles were being hurled down into the street.

Kerans had put in a token appearance at the party, keeping well away from Strangman, who made no attempt to talk to him. Beatrice had also seemed subdued, apparently grappling with the psychic paradox that had blocked Kerans' brain the previous day. Now determined on the only solution available, Kerans' own mind felt clear and co-ordinated again,

extending outwards beyond the perimeter of the drained lagoon.

Only fifty miles to the south, the rain-clouds were packed together in tight layers, blotting out the swamps and archipelagoes of the horizon. Obscured by the events of the past days, the archaic sun in his mind beat again with immense power, its identity merging now with that of the real sun hidden behind the rain-clouds. Relentless and magnetic, it seemed to call him southward, to the great heat and the submerged lagoons of the Equator.

Assisted by Riggs, Beatrice climbed up on to the roof of the building which also served as the helicopter landing stage. When the pilot started his engine and the rotors began to spin, Kerans quickly made his way down to the balcony which ringed the building two floors below. Separated by a hundred yards or so on either side, he was directly between the helicopter and the barrage, the continuous terrace of the large office block linking the three points.

Behind the building was an enormous bank of silt, reaching upwards out of the surrounding swamp to the railings of the terrace, on to which spilled a luxurious outcrop of vegetation. Ducking below the broad fronds of the fern-trees, he raced along to the barrage, fitted between the end of the building and the adjacent shoulder. The original inlet, once twenty yards wide and deep had shrunk to a narrow channel clogged with mud and fungi, its six-foot-wide mouth blocked by a rampart of heavy logs. Initially, once the rampart was removed, the rate of flow would be small, but as more and more of the silt was carried away the mouth would widen again.

From a small cache below a loose flagstone he withdrew two square black boxes, each containing six sticks of dynamite lashed together. As the helicopter engine began to fire more loudly, the exhaust spitting brightly into the darkness, he lit the short 30-second fuse, straddled the rail and ran out towards the centre of the barrage.

There he bent down and suspended the boxes from a small peg he had driven into the outer row of logs that afternoon. They hung safely out of view, about two feet from the water's edge.

"Dr. Kerans ! Get away from there, sir !"

He looked up to see Corporal Macready at the further end of the barrage, standing at the rail of the next roof. He leaned

forward, suddenly spotting the flickering end of the fuse, then rapidly unslung his Thompson gun.

Head down, Kerans raced back along the barrage, reached the terrace as Macready shouted again and then fired a short burst. The slugs tore at the railings, gouging out pieces of the stone, and Kerans fell as one struck his right leg just above the ankle. Pulling himself over the rail, he saw Macready shoulder the gun and jump down on to the barrage.

"Macready! Go back!" he shouted to the Corporal, who was loping across the wooden planks. "It's going to blow!"

Backing away among the fronds, his voice lost in the roar of the helicopter as it carried out its take-off check, he helplessly watched Macready stop in the centre of the barrage and reach down to the boxes.

"Twenty-eight, twenty-nine . . ." Kerans concluded automatically to himself. Turning his back on the barrage, he limped away down the terrace, then threw himself on to the floor.

As the tremendous roar of the explosion lifted up into the dark sky, the immense fountain of erupting foam and silt briefly illuminated the terrace, outlining Kerans' spread-eagled form. From an initial crescendo the noise seemed to mount in a continuous sustained rumble, the breaking thunder of the shock wave yielding to the low rush of the bursting cataract. Clods of silt and torn vegetation spattering on the tiles around him, Kerans stumbled to his feet and reached the rail.

Widening as he watched, the water jetted down into the open streets below, carrying with it huge sections of the silt bank. There was a concerted rush to the deck of the depot-ship, a dozen arms pointing up at the water pouring out of the breach. It swilled into the square, only a few feet deep, blotting out the fires and splashing against the hull of the ship, still rocking slightly from the impact of the explosion.

Then, abruptly, the lower section of the barrage fell forwards, a brace of a dozen twenty-foot logs going down together. The U-shaped saddle of silt behind capsized in turn, exposing the full bore of the inlet creek, and what appeared to be a gigantic cube of water fifty feet high tipped into the street below like a flopping piece of jelly. With a dull rumbling roar of collapsing buildings the sea poured in full flood.

"Kerans!"

He turned as a shot whipped overhead, saw Riggs running forward from the landing stage, pistol in hand. His engine stalled, the pilot of the helicopter was helping Beatrice out of the cabin.

The building was shaking under the impact of the torrent sweeping past its shoulder. Supporting his right leg with his hand, Kerans hobbled into the lee of the small tower which held his previous observation window. From his trouser belt he pulled a heavy .45 Colt, held the butt in both hands and fired twice around the corner at the approaching figure of Riggs. Both shots went wild, but Riggs stopped and backed off a few feet, taking cover behind a balustrade.

Feet moved quickly towards him and he looked round as Beatrice raced along the terrace. Reaching the corner as Riggs and the pilot shouted after her she sank down on her knees beside Kerans.

"Robert, you've got to leave! Now, before Riggs brings more of his men! He wants to kill you, I know."

Kerans nodded, getting to his feet. "The Corporal—I didn't realise he was patrolling." He took a last look at the lagoon, the black water surging across it through the buildings, level with the top line of their windows. Upended, its paddles stripped away, the depot-ship drifted slowly towards the far shore. Kerans watched it with pleasure, smelling the fresh tang that the water had brought again to the lagoon.

"Robert! Hurry!" Beatrice pulled his arm, glancing back over her shoulder at the darting figures of Riggs and the pilot only fifty yards away. "Darling, where are you going? I'm sorry I can't be with you..."

"South," Kerans said softly, listening to the roar of the deepening water. "Towards the sun. You'll be with me, Bea."

He embraced her, then tore himself from her arms and ran to the rear rail of the terrace, pushing back the heavy fern fronds. As he stepped down on to the silt bank Riggs and the pilot appeared round the corner and fired into the foliage, but Kerans ducked and ran away between the curving trunks, sinking up to his knees in the soft mud.

The edge of the swamp had receded slightly, and he painfully dragged the bulky catamaran, home-made from four fifty-gallon drums arranged in parallel pairs, through the thick

rasp-weeds to the water. Riggs and the pilot emerged through the ferns as he pushed off.

While the outboard kicked into life he lay exhausted on the planking, the shots from Riggs' .38 cutting through the small triangular sail. Slowly the interval of water widened to a hundred and then two hundred yards, and he reached the first of the small islands that grew out of the swamp on the roofs of isolated buildings. Hidden by them, he sat up and reefed the sail, then looked back for the last time at the perimeter of the lagoon.

Riggs and the pilot were no longer visible, but high up on the tower of the building he could see the lonely figure of Beatrice, waving slowly towards the swamp, changing tirelessly from one arm to the other although she was unable to distinguish him among the islands. Far to her right, rising up above the encompassing silt banks, were the other familiar landmarks he knew so well, even the green roof of the Ritz, fading into the haze. At last all he could see were the isolated letters of the giant slogan Strangman's men had painted, looming out of the darkness over the flat water like a concluding epitaph: TIME ZONE.

The opposing flow of water slowed his progress, and fifteen minutes later, when the helicopter roared over, he had still not reached the edge of the swamp. Passing the top floor of a small building, he glided in through one of the windows, waited quietly as the aircraft roared up and down, machine-gunning the islands.

When it left he pushed on again, within an hour finally navigated the exit waters of the swamp and entered the broad inland sea that would lead him to the south. Large islands, several hundred yards in length, covered its surface, their vegetation crowding out into the water. Shipping the outboard, he set the small sail, made a steady two or three miles an hour tacking across the light southerly breeze.

His leg had begun to stiffen below the knee, and he opened the small medical kit he had packed and washed the wound in a penicillin spray, then bandaged it tightly. Just before dawn, when the pain became unbearable, he took one of the morphine tablets and fell off into a loud, booming sleep, in which the great sun expanded until it filled the entire universe, the stars themselves jolted by each of its beats.

He woke at seven the next morning, lying back against the mast in bright sunlight, the medical kit open on his lap, the bows of the catamaran rammed lightly into a large fern-tree growing off the edge of a small island. A mile away, flying fifty feet above the water, the helicopter raced along, machine-gun fire flickering from its cabin at the islands below. Kerans shipped the mast and glided in under the tree, waiting until the helicopter left. Massaging his leg, but fearful of the morphine, he made a small meal of a bar of chocolate, the first of ten he had been able to collect.

The aerial attacks were resumed at half-hour intervals, the aircraft once flying directly overhead. From his hiding place in one of the islands Kerans clearly saw Riggs looking out from the hatchway, his small jaw jutting fiercely. However, the machine-gun fire became more and more sporadic, and the flights were discontinued finally that afternoon.

By then, at five o'clock, Kerans was almost completely exhausted. The noon temperature of a hundred and fifty degrees had drained the life out of him, and he lay limply under the moistened sail, letting the hot water drip down on to his chest and face, praying for the cooler air of the evening. The surface of the water turned to fire, so that the craft seemed suspended on a cloud of drifting flame. Pursued by strange visions, he paddled feebly with one hand.

The next day, by good luck, as the storm-clouds moved overhead between himself and the sun, the air grew markedly cooler, falling to ninety-five degrees at noon. The massive black cumulus, only four or five hundred feet above, dimmed the air and he revived sufficiently to start the outboard and raise his speed to ten miles per hour. Circling between the islands, he moved on southwards, following the sun that pounded in his mind. Later that evening, as the rain-storms lashed down, he felt well enough to stand up on one leg by the mast, letting the torrential bursts rain across his chest, stripping away the ragged fabric of his jacket. When the first of the storm-belts moved off the visibility cleared, and he could see the southern edge of the sea, a line of tremendous silt banks over a hundred yards in height. In the spasmodic sunlight they glittered like fields of gold along the horizon, the jungle beyond rising above them.

Half a mile from the shore the outboard ran dry, and he unbolted the motor and threw it into the water, paddling

slowly against the head-breeze. Beaching the craft, he dismantled it and ported the sections up the enormous sludge-covered slopes, hoping for a southward extension of the waterway. Around him the great banks undulated for miles, the curving dunes dotted with cuttlefish and nautiloids.

Finally he abandoned the craft and trudged on ahead with a small parcel of supplies, looking back from the next crest as the drums sank slowly below the surface. Carefully avoiding the quicksands in the hollows between the dunes, he moved on towards the jungle, the great horsetails and fern-trees reaching a hundred feet into the air.

He rested again below a tree on the edge of the forest, carefully cleaning his pistol. Ahead of him he could hear the bats screech and dive among the dark trunks in the endless twilight world of the forest floor, the iguanas grunt and snarl. Cutting a branch off one of the trees, he hobbled forward into the shadows.

By evening the rainfall started, slashing at the huge umbrellas a hundred feet above, the black light only broken when phosphorescent rivers of water broke and poured down on him. Frightened of resting for the night, he pressed on, shooting off the attacking iguanas, darting from the shelter of one massive tree-trunk to the next.

For three days he pushed ahead sleeplessly through the forest, feeding on giant berries like clusters of apples, cutting a longer branch as a crutch. Now and then, to his left, he glimpsed the silver back of a jungle river, its surface dancing in the rainstorms, but massive mangroves formed the banks and he was unable to reach it.

Then, abruptly, he stepped out on to the shores of an immense lagoon, over a mile in diameter, ringed by a beach of white sand, through which protruded the top floors of a few ruined buildings, like beach chalets seen at a distance. In one of these he rested for a full day, trying to mend his ankle, which had become black and swollen. Looking out from the window at the disc of water, he watched the rain discharge itself into the surface with relentless fury; as the clouds moved away and the water smoothed into a glass sheet its colours seemed to recapitulate all the changes he had witnessed in his dreams.

That he had travelled over a hundred and fifty miles southward he could tell from the marked rise in temperature. Again the heat had become all-pervading, rising to a hundred and forty degrees, and he felt reluctant to leave the lagoon, with its empty beaches and quiet ring of jungle.

At last he tied the crutch to his leg again, and with the butt of the empty .45 scratched on the wall below the window, almost sure that no-one would ever read the message:

*14th day. Have rested and am moving
south. All is well. Kerans.*

So he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn Sun.

—J. G. Ballard

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The Ship was divided into three huge sections within which two separate factions had survived the long voyage through interstellar space—but they were separated by the impenetrable section known as "The Ruins" . . .

BLISS

by DAVID ROME

Chapter One

On those secret evenings when Joann and I would huddle together in the ruins of the disused lowerdeck transmitter, I would often talk about my family—and Jack was always largest in my mind. I could never remember a time when I had bested him. At seven he was twisting my arm up my back and making me shriek like a girl; at twelve he was smooth-limbed and tall, smiling and lording it over me; and at twenty, in a fit of temper, he tossed a heavy book across the cabin one night and sent me staggering.

Our cabin wasn't like the decaying lowerdeck nest where Joann's people lived. It was lavishly upperdeck, thickly carpeted and expensively furnished. Ion-gravity here was more efficient too. My father sat comfortably reading, knees crossed and body relaxed.

He didn't look up when Jack threw the book, but mother came fussing in, a tiny woman with a dimple-soft mouth. Shaking her head, she didn't say anything. She stooped to pick up the book, but Jack snatched it away and crossed to the shelves.

He slotted it neatly into place, smilingly arrogant. His eyes moved to father, bland face complacent.

Father had looked up sharply when mother bustled in. Now he turned to Jack, a tall man with dark, in-sucked cheeks. His lips were thin and pale, like a chalk line under big hooking nose.

"Curb your enthusiasm," he said coldly.

I laughed softly, and Jack snapped a glance at me, eyes flashing. I gestured obscenely at him—an upthrusting motion with the fingers that I'd learned from the lowerdeck people.

His mouth—so like father's—went tight. He pivoted spotted a vase behind mother, lifted it and threw it hard and viciously, at chest height. I ducked aside and it shattered on the wall at my back; the pieces fell plopping into the carpet.

There was a silence—and mother scurried forward, snatching up the fragments as though their disappearance would lighten Jack's punishment.

But Jack had no intention of being punished. He was stabbing his fingers into the air, imitating my gesture. "He was doing this to me! He learnt it from the Plebs!"

None of my family knew of my close contact with the lower-deck peoples, but my father was a member of the Presidium and mention of Pleb influence on his son was enough to heat him to violence.

"Is this true?" said my father.

The truth was already a flush in my cheeks. He stepped forward slowly, his eyes dark with fury. I felt a rush of nausea and swallowed desperately. "I didn't know what it meant—"

"Myles—please!" Mother's hand was on his arm.

For an instant father's eyes were close to mine, still black and smouldering. Then he gestured very obviously with his chin in the direction of my room, and mother bustled forward, anxious to get me out of his sight.

"You thank your lucky stars," she said later.

"My what? What are stars?"

Her soft mouth was puckering.

"Go to sleep, boy."

"What are stars?" I persisted.

"A saying, just a saying . . ."

And when she was gone I slept, dreaming. Somehow our ship crossed the unlit emptiness of space and reached Bliss during my generation; and the lowerdeck rose in revolt and the ruling Presidium was destroyed . . .

The next day there was to be a whipping and Removal in the Lower place, and father was up early, dressing in ceremonial black.

While he was twisting and turning in front of the mirrors, mother hurried Jack and me into our robes and out of the cabin. Father would be practising with the whips, and this was something even Jack—almost adult—wasn't allowed to see.

As we turned into the passagetube leading to the avenue, Jack swung on me.

"The climb?" he said, smiling. "Or aren't you in the mood?" His eyes were on mine, his lips curling.

I knew what he meant. For years now, Jack and I had shared a secret. At the end of our passagetube, no more than a yard from the avenue itself, there was a natural ladder—the corner of a window, the top of a door frame, another window, a crevice—and then the roof of the deck house. It was a dangerous climb and Jack knew I was afraid of it.

Now, though, with the memory of our clash the night before fresh in my mind, there was a strange tightness in my throat. I said very softly, "I'm in the mood," and Jack saw this as the challenge it was, and his eyes sparked suddenly.

Together, then already jostling for first place, we followed the passagetube until we reached the point where it broke out into the avenue. We looked across the wide street, but it was deserted. Jack was a second faster than I was. He turned back into the tube, gripped the ledge of the window with expert ease. His feet found a hold and he flowed upward. I followed. I was shorter and thinner, and the climb was hard going for me. Jack had reached the roof and was laughing down at me while I was still clawing my way past the second window.

I looked up into his smooth, smiling face, and the hate surged inside me. Then it was gone and there was only determination. I flexed my legs, groped with my fingers until I found the slight crevice that was the only aid to the summit at this point, and with one leg swinging dangerously over the thirty foot drop I literally flung myself at the roof.

And somehow I got over the edge. I had to strain with my palms flat on the steel and the corner of the roof cutting into my chest, but I made it. I came to my feet, shaking, and together Jack and I looked along the tops of a dozen other houses, all exactly the same height, forming a pathway that

was only broken by the narrow passagetubes.

"Someday," Jack breathed, "we'll go all the way down that pathway, Dom. Right into the heart of the Presidium. . ."

I nodded shortly, because I knew we didn't have much time. If we weren't at the Lower Place, mother would get to hear of it—and she would mention it to father.

I tugged at Jack's robe—and regretted it instantly. He took it as a sign of weakness, and he dawdled down the side of the building after I had reached the deck again. He made a show of fear at the bottom, mimicking me, and I turned away from him, going off down the avenue. He walked just behind me for a while, repeating the act, but finally, when I didn't respond, he grew tired of this and he spurted a little, drawing level with me as we strolled together down the wide street, where the hydroponics were trimmed and neat, forming squares of colour in front of each deck house.

It was quiet out here, with only a few people making their way in the direction of the companionway. Overhead, the sunlights were burning down as they always did during daytime, diffused by the vastness of the ship.

None of us really knew how big the ship was. We knew that beyond the Pleb city where thousands lived now, and beyond the machine domes and the cultivated hydroponics, there were the Ruins—another city where other people had lived generations ago. But no one—not even members of the Presidium—ever went to the Ruins now. There were dangers—and stories of ghosts—there that none of us could understand.

We had reached the companionway now, and the Power Room was below us. Jack and I dawdled down the steel steps and reached the lower level. And now, approaching the viewports of the Power Room, we did a forbidden thing: we raised our eyes to the level of the ports, and looked in at the deserted bucket-seats and strange white dials. Centuries ago the ancients of the ship had worshipped here—had paid homage to these instruments. Now the Presidium—Gods and Masters of the ship—forbade it.

As we stared, footsteps sounded on the companionway above. Jack breathed a warning and we ran. We rounded the Power Room and the companionway to the lowerdeck was ahead. We took the first dozen steps at full tilt, then slowed down. Below us now was Pleb City.

Jack led the way down the companionway, his back arching in excitement. Cold eyes touched us as our robes caught the momentary attention of the Plebs; but there were others from the upperdeck among them, and Jack and I threaded our way through the crowds until we reached those we knew.

Jack was loud and cheerful, slapping backs and smiling at the girls. I stood a little apart, searching the Plebs for Joann's slim body and her copper coloured hair. But I couldn't see her, and after a while my eyes were drawn to the cleared circle of the Lower Place, where the single steel pillar rose into the sky.

A man and a woman were out there—the man wearing upperdeck robes, the woman a Pleb. They were bound by the wrists, their legs spread wide and their bodies hugged close to each side of the pillar. Behind them was the Presidium stand, filling quickly. These men were bright-robed, hard eyes already feeding on the woman at the pillar.

Now, as I stared at the captive man and woman, a dull rage was smouldering inside me. And mingled with the rage there was fear. Fear of my father's power, and fear of the Presidium he represented, because Joann had hinted one night that she thought an Informer had seen us together on the outskirts of Pleb City. And the Presidium forbade intimacy between upper and lower-deck peoples.

As the thought came to my mind, my eyes were drawn upward to the companionway above the Lower Place. And there at its head was my father. He was descending with other Whippers, and as they approached the central pillar a silence settled over the crowd and a voice spoke out from the Presidium Stand:

"This man and this woman . . ."

A pink-lipped upperdeck girl whispered loudly: "They bratted out of bounds!" And she blushed and squirmed with pleasure at her own crudity.

"... aware that our levels of society must be preserved . . ."

The pink-lipped girl was nuzzling closer to Jack, lips parting sensually as she listened to the intonation.

"... according to the dictates of our ancients, did wilfully commit copulation, and did in defiance of these laws permit conception to follow their act."

The Whippers stepped forward. The crowd drew in breath, and were silent. The whipping would come first; then the Public Removal, and finally the ritual of Sterilization.

The man's back was bared now, and his robes hung in a puff round his hips. The woman had pressed closer to the pillar, her pale shoulders arched, thin body trembling.

And now my eyes were fastened on my father, drawing his face closer; the cruel lips and cold, narrowed eyes. And soon—as the whip rose and fell—I found that my body was shaking and that Jack's cheeks were flushing with anger and shame as the others around us saw tears standing wet in my eyes...

Chapter Two

I don't know how long it was before a hand touched my arm. Jack had turned away violently, with an oath, and now the others had followed his lead. Then the hand, soft yet firm, touched my arm, and through the mask of blind hate for my father and Jack I saw dark eyes and pale face, and the hair, copper bright.

Joann whispered quickly, "Come away, Dom!" and I glanced once at Jack, afraid he would see her. But the Public Removal had begun and his hard eyes were lusting, his hands clutching the girl with the pink lips to his side.

I moved away silently, sliding through the crowd. Joann took my hand, almost running, and at last we were clear. I brushed one hand across my eyes, flushing now, because Joann had seen me crying like a child. The crowds were behind us; we were off down the street from the Lower Place. Here there were poky cabins in the cave-like Pleb buildings. The walkways were littered with refuse.

Joann and I walked hand in hand, knowing we were safe in this part of the city. My upperdeck robes would attract attention, but no one would challenge my right to be here among the Plebs. The spirit had gone out of these people; only the upperdeck descendants of ancient captains were alive now.

I turned to my right, leading Joann. Here the street widened, cutting out toward the hull of the ship. I knew where I was going. At the end of this street, almost buried under fallen steel cabins, was the derelict transmitter. Here we could sit together, absolutely hidden.

By the time we had reached it, walking now alongside deserted and decaying buildings, I was brighter again, and my shame had diminished. I eased my way through the debris

to where the transmitter had once stood alone in a square surrounded by cabins, and I turned to help Joann to come through.

Then, when her fingers were curling in mine, and her face was thrusting out of the gloomy tunnel of debris, she stopped abruptly. Her fingers tightened suddenly, then drew back. She raised her forefinger, pointing beyond me. Then, very slowly she came out of the tunnel.

"Dom?" she said wonderingly. "Hasn't something changed?"

I turned quickly, suddenly afraid. And in some indefinable way the transmitter did seem different, did seem changed.

Then, going forward cautiously across fallen steel, I knew why. A great central beam, which had always lain half across the doorway of the transmitter, had been removed. Somehow it had contrived to shift itself from the doorway to the deck beside the transmitter.

"Someone else?" said Joann nervously. "Meeting here, Dom?"

I shook my head. I didn't know. I told Joann to stay where she was and I went forward—only two more paces—alone. Now I was directly outside the transmitter, looking in.

There was no one inside. The transmitters, whatever they had been used for in the past—and though we knew the name of these boxes, we didn't know their purpose—hadn't been designed to accommodate more than one adult at a time. Joann and I, both slim, were just able to fit in. We sat side by side now, on the metal slab that wasn't steel or aluminium or any metal we knew.

With an effort I said, "All right now?"

But she wasn't—and neither was I. Someone else knew the secret of the transmitter—someone else had been here. Joann and I were awkward with each other, aware of the difference but not speaking it aloud. At nineteen we weren't lovers; but soon we would be. There was silence between us.

Finally I said, "Will tonight be better?"

We had come here to forget that whippings, removals and sterilization could exist. But it wasn't working. Joann shivered faintly, as though this place would be fearful when the city was asleep.

I said gently, "Joann—"

And a terrifying thing happened!

Joann melted!

There is no other word for it. One instant we were together, and the next, Joann was gone.

I felt her go—actually felt her oiling into nothingness. Then I was sitting in the booth, my arms still clasped ridiculously, my back pressed hard against the steel wall.

And then, with a silent cry already tearing my throat, I was jammed against that wall until my ribs crackled, and an arm in rough-cloth robes was driving savagely into my face while a huge body writhed in liquid-steel motion, threatening to crush me.

And I couldn't move.

Couldn't breathe . . .

I could hear a voice somewhere in the far distance, and I stirred. Now, as my eyes cleared, the speaker knelt beside me, a short, very thin man with hair like crayon streaks across his scalp.

"Just rest a couple of minutes. Get your breath back," he said. Then he turned to another, taller, man at his side. "The Gid sent him through. He must have been near the transmitter."

"Or in it," said the taller man. "But not on the hot-spot, like the girl, when we cleared the line. We should have known she wouldn't be alone."

Mention of Joann sparked a reaction in me. I didn't know how long I'd been lying here, unconscious. But the tall man, seeing my concern, nodded at me. "She's okay."

He was young—perhaps twenty-eight or nine—but he had an air of authority about him. He was tall, too; but there was a bigger man at his back. He saw me start, and he spoke again. "Don't let him worry you. He's a Gid, boy. He's harmless."

And now, very slowly, my fear was subsiding. Soon I began to ask wary, slow-phrased questions.

"Where is Joann?"

They seemed to treat me less like a child now. The younger man said again, "She's okay." Then, and somehow his voice was harsher, he said, "What were you doing around the transmitter?"

I said slowly, "Where am I?" but nobody answered my question. Instead, the younger man gestured to the Gid, and the huge body shuffled forward. A word I didn't catch passed between them; then I was lifted. The Gid carried me without

apparent effort, the others walking six-inches-smaller at his sides, and now I saw that there were no buildings here—just flat deck going off into a greenish-hazed distance. Behind us was the transmitter, set close to the curving steel wall of the hull. The wall arched upward until it was lost overhead; the sunlights were brighter, almost painful to the eyes.

As I squinted, staring up into the sky, the taller man laughed softly and said, "Your sunlights were as powerful as these a century ago, but they're running down now—there'll soon be darkness forrard."

Forrard. So I knew one thing—we were at the rear of the ship. And I thought I knew the purpose of the transmitters now. But where—where exactly—were we? Beyond the Ruins? Beyond the hydroponic farms? Were the giant Gids the ghosts that haunted the Ruins?

"Darkness . . . ?" I was probing now, wanting to know more. "How can there be darkness forrard, and no darkness here?"

Men and women were passing us at frequent intervals—Gids and others—but they didn't give us more than a cursory glance, until, quite suddenly, a man passing close caught sight of my upperdeck robes. He was a yard to one side of us, staring up at me; and suddenly he spoke my name: "Dominic Nicklaus!" His eyes were wide, incredulous.

I swung my head around and met his stare. But I didn't recognize him. He was shortish, lean and grey-haired. He was familiar—yes, I had seen him somewhere before—but I couldn't go further than that. He was already speaking quickly to the two men with the Gid, and I thought, but wasn't sure, that I heard my father's name mentioned.

Then this man I knew, but didn't know, spoke up to me again. "You're in the right hands, Dominic. You'll be all right here."

Then he was walking on—my questions were forgotten—and still I couldn't place him. Later I learned that there wasn't any particular reason why I should have been able to. He was from upperdeck—that was all. He knew my family and my name because he had been a member of an anti-Presidium group; it was well known in parts of the upperdeck that despite my father's position I had no love for the Presidium.

And now, as we walked on again, I noticed two things that had changed. Firstly, the landscape. Not flat any more, but broken by a low blister that had been invisible from any distance. It was from the side of this blister that men were coming and going. And secondly, the manner in which I was treated. The tall man spoke an order to the Gid, and instantly he set me on my feet; and the voices that spoke to me, though pleasant enough before, had real respect now, despite my age.

And as we entered the blister, going into what I was to discover was their transport system, I suddenly knew—and it was an almost physical shock—that I *was* in the right hands.

And for the first time in my life, with a sudden anticipation of action, I felt really alive.

The transport system must have been primitive by Earth standards, but to me, with no previous experience of such marvels, it was almost frightening.

We took our places in a tubular car, and I was strapped to an acceleration couch by the Gid. Slide doors closed, and the car began to move.

As we drew away I saw a transmitter cubicle set inside the entrance to the blister; but it was in poor condition, obviously inoperable. So these people weren't magicians. There were some things they couldn't repair.

As though he had been reading my thoughts, the tall man said, "This tube system once helped to join the whole ship together. The complement of the transmitters, you understand? We've got some of it back into order, but forrard it couldn't be done. The tube has collapsed; the entry blisters have caved in."

I was going to ask about Joann again, but the car had increased its speed, and now the need for the acceleration couches was obvious. I was pressed into it by a giant hand. For minutes I was held there, unable to speak. Then the pressure lessened sharply. The car ran in under another blister and halted silently.

"Joann?" I said, as I walked unsteadily beside them, leaving the car.

"The girl?" said the smaller man. "She's in good hands." Then suddenly he stopped, taking my arm. We were just inside the blister. "Look, Dominic. There's one thing you have to know . . ."

The taller man spoke. "Your way of life is over, Dom. You can never go back to it."

He was holding my eyes; and suddenly I felt strange facing this tall man, obviously a leader, who was so grave. Did I want to go back? I couldn't be sure. All I knew was that excitement was stirring inside me. Whatever was going on, I wanted to be a part of it. There was movement here—action. Not lethargy and decay.

Chapter Three

They seemed to understand my silence. We moved out of the blister into the glaring sunlight, and here—I actually stumbled in amazement—here there were no open spaces. Buildings rose high on all sides, gleaming metal and glass constructions that seemed to be lost in a haze of distance overhead.

I was staggered. I walked on, two more steps, and inexplicably the walkway was moving under my feet. We stood—merely stood—and we were carried along.

"This was the third city," the smaller man was explaining, "abandoned generations ago when the first radiation from the Tube began to permeate the shielding." He pointed with one hand, half turning. "Back there is the wild hydroponic belt, and beyond that the Ruins. Closer, at the edge of our own hydroponic farms, are our machine domes. We've worked on them, restored them. We're getting full power now."

"The Ruins were the second city," the taller man told me. "In the panic, when people were dying, that was abandoned too. Now the radiation has dissipated; we've rebuilt City Three—rebuilt it over half a millennium—and now, very soon, our forces will be ready . . ."

We had entered a building. The giant Gid had gone his own way. Rapt, I hadn't even noticed the distance we had covered. Now, as we stepped on to an oval platform that carried us upward, the tall man said, "Do the Plebs hate the Presidium, Dominic?"

I couldn't see the point behind the question. The oval platform halted silently at a higher level and we stepped off. I said slowly, "Hate . . . ? No, I don't think so. They would hate, perhaps, if they had the life left in them to do it. But their apathy—"

The tall man was suddenly alive. His eyes flashed. "That's our problem, Dom. I want you to understand it. We send out the Gids through the transmitters, and they bring us Plebs. But it isn't violation, Dom! Understand that. The hate is there—the revolt is already in them. But we have to bring them here—waken them up, Dom—before they can recognize it!"

We were walking down a passageway with carpet underfoot. I said slowly, "My father is a member of the Presidium . . ." And in my mind I was hearing one word over and again: "*Revolt.*" Was it possible? Another race, living here at the stern of the ship, planning the destruction of a body that had ruled the ship since the beginning of time?

And the Gids? Who were the Gids?

"We know about your father—"

Suddenly I was remembering my dream—years ago? The Plebs in revolt, the Presidium destroyed. I said softly, "Who are you?"

The tall man said quietly, "There were groups, Dom. Anti-Presidium groups. Some of them were upperdeck, some lower—and they overcame the apathy, Dom. Years ago now—I was born in City Three—the groups united, broke away from the rule of the Presidium. They came here, knowing somehow that the radiation would no longer be lethal. They found the Gids—men who had survived and mutated—had become immune. Radiation hadn't killed them. They were a new race."

We had stopped now, and the tall man's hand was lifting to open a door. "The rest was a matter of time, Dom. Machines were repaired, the city rebuilt. We found medical supplies, abandoned years before. We sent men into Pleb City, where the machines were running down and the sunlights were slowly dying out, and we were able to repair some of the transmitters. Now the Gids go out regularly to bring us Plebs. We've been building, Dom—a city, and a force. A new people, united in purpose: to overthrow the Presidium."

The door opened then—and suddenly Joann was there, turning quickly as I stood for a moment, unmoving in the doorway.

"Dominic!"

And we were together again. When I turned, as a quiet sound caught my attention, I saw that the door had closed and that Joann and I were alone.

I spoke her name, and she said quickly, "Sit down, Dom" She was nervous, was close to tears.

I just stared at her. Then I said awkwardly, "Are you all right?"

It was crazy. We were like strangers. We sat down and talked, and I tried to calm her. I told her where we were, and how City Three had begun; and she was silent for a long time after that. Then, very slowly, she got to her feet, and her eyes were still troubled.

"I was left here alone," she said. "I was able to look round this room . . ." She was crossing to a screen that was like a square white eye in the wall.

"I moved a switch, Dom . . ."

Her hand reached out. She touched a switch—and suddenly I was afraid. Then she pressed lightly, the switch clicked down, the screen changed.

A silent cry welled in my throat. I half rose, and fell back. The brightness that glared from the screen seemed to whirl around me in that room. I clawed at my eyes, twisting away from the pain of it—and then, abruptly, the door opened at our backs. The tall man stepped quickly past us, flicked the switch up—and the screen became blank.

"You take that in small doses," he said.

I tried to speak, but my throat had constricted. The tall man was standing with his back to the screen, watching us now. When he spoke, his voice was soft and concerned. "I'm sorry about this . . ."

"*What is it?*" said Joann.

He said slowly, "There's no word for it that you could understand. It is space, and yet not space as you know it. We call it the Universe."

"Space?" The panic was ebbing now. I said softly, "Space is nothingness. Space contains Earth and Bliss—there is nothing between."

"No." The tall man was shaking his head.

"Space is—"

"No, Dom. Space is what you saw on the screen."

There was a desk in that room, and the tall man sat down. He looked at Joann, then at me. "I'm not asking you to accept it—I'm not even expecting you to. Not for a while. But I'll tell you this—and you can listen. Not with belief, or

disbelief, just with an open mind." He leaned back in his chair.

"Somehow—at some time in the past—the vision screens"—and here he gestured at the square eye—"were overlooked; were forgotten, as the true purpose of the Power Room was forgotten. A failure, perhaps, that was never repaired. Now we've put this right at this end of the ship. We can use the screens for their original purpose—to let us see into space!"

He said softly, "Space isn't empty. Space isn't the void you think it is. Space is jam-packed with 'stars' and 'planets'"—and now his voice was very quiet and he wasn't looking at Joann. Only at me. "Bliss isn't a world, Dom. Can you understand that? Bliss is only a name; and out there, out in the Universe, there are hundreds of worlds we could land on; hundreds of worlds we could colonize."

Then his voice rose, and he finished with such emphasis that I knew—somehow I was sure—that this man was speaking the truth.

"The Power Room doesn't house pagan gods! It's a control-centre! It's our means of setting the ship down—*of landing her, Dom!*"

After the first few days of walking around City Three—we stayed together but somehow our relationship was changed—there wasn't much Joann or I could do. We were taken back to the wide, flat deck where the distance was green haze, and we were told to walk here each day. Just walk. This was how they combatted lethargy; strolling alone or in groups for hours each day.

It was a rule that couldn't be broken. Even the Gids, with their shambling gait, were ordered to take the exercise.

On these occasions, when we were tired of walking, Joann and I would sit together, trying always to put our friendship back on its old footing.

Sometimes Joann's eyes would wander toward the transmitter cubicle through which we'd come; and once I asked her, "Are you happy here?"

She didn't answer immediately, but after a while she began to talk about her family, and I was surprised to find that there had been some degree of closeness between them. This was something almost unknown, even on upperdeck.

At other times—when we were approached by the curious—we would ask questions about City Three, and I learned among

other things that the Tube, from which radiation had seeped years ago, was the connection between the habitable part of the ship and the Pile that would push the ship through space forever, providing endless power for the machine domes. The leak in the shielding had been sealed by the Gids, and now there was no danger.

After a week of this, I began to notice a change in Joann. Before, she had been moderately bright, answering my questions readily, smiling often, though with a strange, sad fear in her eyes. Now, as the days passed, and the plan to invade the forward section of the ship rolled on, she became withdrawn and uncommunicative. When we passed men with weapons in their hands her lips would quirk angrily, dark eyes snapping.

She even tried to get into the transmitter one afternoon, but a woman, walking nearby, spotted her in time and was able to pull her back.

After that—while I was caught up in the invasion training—a woman was detailed to watch Joann whenever she was in the transmitter area. Joann's face became stony, and she refused to speak to me if I walked at her side.

She only broke this silence once in the final days. It was early morning and I had followed her out from City Three. I caught up with her as she strode along in cold rage, and she turned on me quickly, almost in tears, and said, "Why are there so many weapons? So many men?"

As calmly as I could, I told her what Brightan, the tall leader, had said. That he didn't want fighting; that the only way to avoid this was to go in with a great number of armed men.

"The Plebs won't be touched, Jo."

She turned away, white-faced, and if I'd known what was going to happen, what was lying in store for both of us, I would have gone after her then, and stayed with her until her mood was over.

But I didn't. The invasion would be beginning in a matter of hours; we were to advance through the hydroponics and the Ruins, striking at the Presidium in a rush from the Pleb city.

The Plebs wouldn't resist—I knew that. But to gain control of the Power Room and land the ship on the closest world we would have to meet upperdeck weapons. Whatever

Brightan said, there was going to be fighting; and I was eager—was actually impatient—for it to begin.

I didn't even glance at Joann after she turned away. I made my way back to the blister, almost at a run, and rode the car into City Three.

I'd been given a room of my own, high up in one of the buildings, and here I stripped off my robes, stepped naked into the shower cubicle and turned on the cold water. For five minutes I let the needle sprays hammer down on my body, then I stepped out, turning off the water. I rubbed myself dry—and now my body was glowing—got out the green-and-grey uniform that had been issued to the invading force and put it on. In the loose-fitting fighting garb I felt hard and tough. I had filled out in the last few weeks, and I was heavier now, and tall. Walking each day had toughened my body and relaxed my mind.

As I tightened the fastenings of my rubber-soled boots, I thought for a moment of Jack, and it was in pity, not in anger. I was tougher than Jack; tougher than my father. If we fought, I would win.

And now, already dressed like a soldier, I picked up my rifle and balanced it in my hands, an ancient weapon Brightan had said, but an effective one. Then I began loading the metal shells into the magazine, as we'd been taught in hard nights of training.

I should have known then, with the weapon in my hands, that this equipment was for something more than overcoming the rule of the Presidium. But had I known—and had the Plebs who had joined us known—what was waiting for us in the ruins of Second City, we would have stripped off our uniforms and stayed where we were, and the ship, under the Presidium rule, could have plunged on for ever toward Bliss.

Which was precisely why Brightan hadn't told us.

Chapter Four

It wasn't until late afternoon that I discovered Joann had disappeared. The city was at fever pitch, the streets and walkways alive with uniformed men. All day, through the audio system, Brightan and the other leaders had been giving us our marshalling instructions.

While the main body pushed in through the Ruins, flanking movement would be carried out by means of the operable

transmitters. The three fingers of the attacking force would be in contact with one another, and the two small groups going through the transmitters would angle in at an order from the central commander, forming a tripod thrust at any upperdeck resistance.

And now, with these instructions ringing in my ears, I suddenly knew that I had to see Joann before I left. It was as though I had already glimpsed something deeper and more dangerous ahead of us that night, and as I hurried out into the street I realized for the first time that I was afraid.

I got on to a crowded walkway, which failed because of its load before it had gone more than a dozen yards. We all stood for a while, just waiting stupidly for the thing to start moving again, but it never did. After a while I got off and ran the two blocks down the static pavement to Joann's apartment.

She had been allotted a room in a building for single girls, and most of the rooms were empty and unfurnished. The whole place rang emptily as I rode the vator to an upper floor and hurried down the passageway. When I reached Joann's door I knocked once and went straight in. But she wasn't there.

It wasn't really a surprise. All the way up on the vator I'd been telling myself that she might be out walking somewhere. But now, as I stood in that empty apartment, I felt the first inexplicable chill of unease.

Something was wrong. I could feel it.

I walked through into the bedroom, on my toes now, for no reason. I touched the contour couch with the palm of my hand, bouncing it, then I turned to the mirror and the array of accessories on the tiny metal shelf. Nothing here.

I returned to the central room, looking around carefully now. And as soon as my eyes touched the little table with its display of flowering ponics I saw the note . . .

I picked it up. And read it:

I'm sorry, Dom, but this isn't my home . . .

Anger welled inside me. The fool! There was only one way she could get home—the transmitters were barred to her—and that was through the wild hydroponics and the Ruins!

And suddenly I was afraid for her. I couldn't help myself. Joann was a child. Just a child. Now, somewhere out there, armed with nothing more than a torch, she was running

through the dying afternoon, struggling through the ponics. By dark she would be among the Ruins.

The old superstitious fear of the Ruins still clung to me. Even as I spun around, almost running to the door—and actually running once I got into the passageway—I was drawing phantom shapes in my mind.

But I think this spurred me on rather than checked me. I rode downward on the vator, and for the first time the oval disc seemed nightmarishly slow. When I reached street-level I turned in the direction of the closest transport dome without an instant's hesitation.

Running toward the blister, I never considered the rights or the wrongs of what I was doing. I suppose I was deserting Brightan, but I never thought of it in that way. I merely realized—and the realization had shocked me into action—that Joann still meant a great deal to me.

I didn't even look back at the city as I got off the tube car on the fringe of the hydroponic farms. I was hoping that Joann hadn't taken the car—that she had followed the walkways on foot and hadn't got too far ahead. I wondered if any of the leathery-skinned farmgirls on the car would report that I'd made off into the ponics. I didn't think so. They weren't given to thinking, and in any case it was common enough for soldiers to be sent on scouting missions alone.

I was off the pathway now, walking in ankle deep growth. Over to my right, small with distance, were the white machine domes. My evertorch was swinging from my belt, but looking up at the sunlights I judged that I wouldn't need it for another few hours.

And now, as I began to push my way into the deeper tangle of wild ponics, I put everything out of my mind that wasn't concerned with finding Joann. I moved as rapidly as I could, using the parallel rows of sunlights overhead to keep myself oriented. The ponics were papery and brittle—breaking a passage through them wasn't difficult. Often I stopped, remaining perfectly still for a full minute at a time, listening for Joann. And once, after two hours, with the sweat running down my body and thighs, I stood stock still, caught for an instant in momentary indecision. What kind of a fool was I? What hope was there of finding her here in a seven-mile wilderness?

But no, with the sunlights already beginning to die and and four of those seven miles behind me, there was nothing I could do but go on. I had to reach the Ruins before dark, and now, conversely, I was hoping that Joann was well ahead; that she would be clear of the hydroponics and into the Ruins before nightfall.

In the final hour of daylight, racing against time now, I covered what must have been almost three miles. When I was at last forced to turn on my torch, I could already see the crumbling outline of the Ruins against the dying lights; and before the darkness was complete, I was picking my way through the overgrown debris of what had once been living-cabins.

It was very quiet here as the night settled down, and the torch beam, cutting its white path through the blackness, seemed brittle and cold. Not like a light at all.

I was walking very slowly now, listening for sounds of Joann. On either side, seemingly ready to topple, were buildings with socket eyes watching. The whole place had a smell of decay and the narrow streets were often blocked by debris. Twice I had to retrace my steps, following the tunnels of darkness around whole buildings that had sunk inward, thrusting jagged steel hands across my path.

Now, with the torchlight shining straight ahead, I was on a wider, clearer road that seemed to run in the right direction. I called Joann's name, twice, then I moved forward—and now, for a reason I couldn't explain, I was carrying my rifle just a shade higher. I still held it in one hand, and I wouldn't admit even to myself that I was afraid. But the ghosts of the Ruins were doing their work well. I was breathing faster, walking slower.

"Joannnn!"

No answer. Only the empty voice echoing in empty buildings. I walked on. Three more steps. Then:

"Joannnn!"

And this time—faintly, very faintly, from somewhere off to my left—I thought I heard an answering cry.

I whirled, torchlight flashing. I shouted again, but there was no answer; and now I began to run, breaking through ponc growth that had somehow penetrated this far, scrambling on hands and knees over high-piled debris.

I can't describe the sound I heard as I entered that final street. Perhaps a shuffle. I flashed the torch eagerly, and a corner of light caught movement. Joann's name was in my throat before I realized that it wasn't Joann.

Above me now—startlingly clear—I could hear her calling my name. *Above me!* Not here in this street.

Very slowly, with a fist of fear closing huge in my stomach, I swept the torch beam along the crooked steel sides of the buildings. Very slowly, with my feet groping blindly amongst refuse and my weapon at the ready, I advanced down the street.

To my right now was the entrance to the building where Joann must be. It was almost blocked. To get through into the building I would have to turn my back on the street and wriggle through, face-down, blind and helpless for the sixty seconds it would take me to get over the debris.

Did I have the courage? Whatever had moved in the street was large, I knew that. I thought of animals from the ponics—there were stories of such things in Pleb folklore; and then I heard Joann call my name again, and there was empty fear in her voice. The fear of a person without hope. Somehow it affected me more than the unknown quantity that hung back on the edge of darkness. Joann was calling my name endlessly, without reason or purpose. Numbly I realized that she didn't even know I was here in this street.

I had to get to her, and there was only one way to do it. I began to back toward the entrance and for an instant the torch beam wavered. Immediately, there was a stir of movement to my right. I flashed the torch in that direction—and now I was against the debris, stumbling. Now I would have to turn, climb, expose myself. I moved the torch a fraction more to the right.

My scream was soundless, but it tore my throat. I fired, the weapon kicking in my hands. I fired three times and the huge figure stumbled forward into the torchlight, bellowing and thrashing as it fell at my feet.

I whirled, flung myself at the pile of debris, kicking with my feet and working, working, with my elbows. And somehow I got through. I still had the rifle and the torch. It was swinging wildly on my belt now as I came to my feet.

As I turned in a slow circle I saw that the windows here were blocked by huge steel shutters, and the debris at the

entrance was packed solid. There was only room for a slim man or boy to squirm through between the top of the doorway and the rubble.

I moved across the ground floor, threading my way cautiously through the strange conical shapes that littered the vast room. I could still hear Joann calling my name from somewhere overhead, but I knew it would be useless to answer her.

I only paused once in that slow advance toward what must be a companionway ahead, and that was when the light from my torch brushed a wall of the building and shone for a moment on one of the cones. I stopped, turning the light on to it, and instantly I became aware of a peculiar rustling noise that continued until I swung the light away.

Around me now, as I moved on, other rustlings began; but I continued toward the companionway, picking out the steel steps with my torch and climbing quickly upward now, not stopping to account for the strange sounds.

The companionway seemed to go on for ever, but finally, with the breath burning in my throat, I reached the higher floor. I ran along the passageway, sent the torch beam probing into first one room, then another; and at my third try I found Joann.

Chapter Five

I talked to her softly, urgently, for long minutes before she could begin to understand that I really was here with her; but when the realization finally came she recovered quickly. She clasped my hands, drew me closer, and spoke my name with meaning.

I let her cry after that, just kneeling beside her while she quivered in my arms; and she was calmer after a few moments, and she drew away from me a little, as though angry with herself. But she didn't say anything about her break from City Three. Instead, she looked at me closely, and with a trace of fear in her voice asked, "Did you see them?"

"I think I killed one," I said.

"Killed?"

I told her then how I had shot at the huge figure in the street outside; how it had fallen, thrashing in agony. When I finished, Joann stared at me in a way I couldn't understand.

"The cones. Dom? Haven't you seen them?"

With a stir of uneasiness I remembered the rustling sound that had accompanied my passage across the vast floor below.

"Cones? They are lifeless, Joann."

She said softly, "It was still light when I came here. I was afraid—perhaps of the ghosts in the Ruins—and I found this building with its shutters and its safety."

"The Giants—" I began.

"I haven't seen them. I saw the cones. They came here at dusk. I heard the noise, and I went downstairs, and they were inside the building. They weren't cones at first; they were taller, almost like plants. They folded, became motionless as it got dark."

With an effort I sought to hold on to reality. "The entrance is blocked—"

"I know, Dom. But they came in."

"How?"

She was shaking her head. "I don't know—" And suddenly, in that room, I knew why Brightan had waited so long—why so many men had been marshalled for the attack. Brightan knew. Brightan and the others—the leaders—knew that there were strange forces to be overcome in the Ruins. Mutants, like the Gids? They had to be mutants. Living here in the rubble of Second City.

The ship wouldn't be won until the Ruins were cleared. Brightan knew that. And now, like a spark breathed upon, there was a glimmer of hope. How long would it be before Brightan and his men came thrusting into the Ruins?

Joann spoke again now. "When they were coming in, Dom, they seemed to rise—to grow—through the floor."

I was staring at her, considering this, when the noise began outside. A steady, rhythmic, *bloom! bloom!* against the wall of the building.

I was on my feet already in reflex action, my thoughts leaping back to Brightan. I swung toward the source of the noise, found it, and ran forward out of the room, Joann at my back, her own torch flashing now.

Outside in the passageway there were windows that looked down from height on to the street. Once this place had been some kind of storeroom—the vast floor below protected from looters by the shutters. Up here there had been offices; the windows were uncovered.

Now Joann and I reached the windows, and I shone my torch downward but saw nothing. I ran it along to the left, fruitlessly, then to the right. And this time, in the white light, we saw a heaving steel beam—saw the obscene figures and giant, muscled arms that thrust and battered it against the side of the building.

I killed the light, caught Joann's arm and dragged her away from the windows. The whole building seemed to be vibrating now, and I knew that the wall wouldn't stand against the ram for long.

My fear had communicated itself to Joann now, and almost at a run, stumbling in the darkness, we somehow got down the companionway to the ground floor. We didn't switch on our torches—we seemed to know instinctively that the Cones would react to the light. Already the rustling was beginning again, as though they were stirring.

I checked Joann with a hand on her wrist; then I went forward alone. Now I did turn on my torch, but I smothered the beam with my hand so that it came out weakly red. I held the spot of light a foot in front of me, following it carefully as it picked out the path through the Cones.

Ahead now, a dozen paces away, was the entrance. I turned off the torch when I reached it. By touch, forcing myself higher an inch at a time, I worked my way up the slope of the rubble. When I judged I was near the top, I groped under my body for the torch on its belt strap, dragging it free. I turned it on, shining the beam through my finger. When I had positioned myself at the gap so that no light would get back into storeroom, I drew my hand away and let the white light flare out into the darkness.

Instantly, there was writhing movement and I glimpsed the giant shapes for a moment. They retreated to the edge of the light, stirring there in jagged shadows. I cut off the light.

I retreated, sliding down the rubble, still shielding the torch. There would be no way out here.

As I picked my way toward the place where I had left Joann there was a different note to the sound of the battering ram against the wall. The wall was weakening. Soon the ram would smash its way through and the Giants would swarm in.

I almost ran those last interminable yards; and when I did reach the companionway at last, Joann was gone. The shock

stopped me dead. My hand slipped off the torch and the light flashed suddenly bright across the floor of the store. I saw Joann then—she was half-turned, staring at me. She had picked her way across the floor with her own torch shielded. There was a dozen yards between us now.

And at the same moment, close behind me, there was a movement. I whirled, and the torch was still on. It spotlighted the Cone that had begun to move, glistening on the side of the thing. The combination of the light and sound was disturbing them, bringing them awake. Now, around the first, there were others coming alive, wavering from side to side as they lost their conical shapes and became plantlike—grotesque.

I switched off the torch, and at the instant when darkness slammed in, the Giants broke through the wall of the store. I heard the thundering crash of falling steel, then the cries of triumph as they leapt through the breach.

I whirled and ran. I heard Joann screaming and I ran in her direction. I blundered head on into a softly vegetable Cone, toppling it over. Even as I recoiled there was a roar of sound behind me and a flare of light. Flames burst upward and heat exploded across the room. Instantly the place was filled with a gagging odour and I turned, saw huge figures in the shadows at the edge of the fire. Then a second Cone caught alight—and now I knew that the Giants were attacking them. I could see Joann clearly as I ran again. I reached her and she seized my arm, pointing.

"Look! Down there, Dom!"

There was a hole in the floor of the storeroom, going down into blackness. And now I remembered how Joann had said that the Cones seemed to rise from the floor. Was this their way in?

The question was soon answered. Already there was a score of them lumbering towards us—toward their escape route. This was war. The Giants hadn't broken in to get at us; they were intent on destroying the Cones. The Giants were night creatures. Did the Cones hunt by day? Was this some terrible revenge on the sleeping animal-plants for a scourge they inflicted during the hours when the Giants slept?

But now, with two more of the creatures on fire, and still more of them making in our direction, there were only seconds left in which to make a decision.

A group of Cones—helpless when darkness fell—had chosen this sealed storeroom in which to conceal themselves. Now, for Joann and me, there were only two ways out: through the hole that the Giants had torn in the wall, or down into the pit.

Hesitating only for an instant, I seized Joann's arm, flashed the torch downward and saw the bottom of the pit no more than ten feet below us. Then we jumped. We struck the steel floor almost together, rolled, and I came to my feet. Flashing the light in all directions, I saw that this place had once been part of the ship's transport system. The roof above the tunnel had fallen in, and there was an abandoned tubecar down here, crushed by the weight of debris that had fallen long ago. To our left, though, there was a clear length of tunnel, and I helped Joann to her feet, even as the first of the Cones reached the edge of the hole over our heads.

As we sprang clear the thing let itself fall, and another followed. I fired twice, then Joann and I backed away. The Cones were moving in our direction and now I could see their true form as they closed the distance between us with frightening speed. They seemed unaware of us, but when we turned and broke in to a run they increased their pace. I thought the light might be attracting them, but we couldn't move at speed without it. I tried flicking it off at intervals, picking a clear path for us beforehand. But this slowed us down, and the Cones gained precious yards. I fired at them again, the bullets whining along the tunnel; but two or three direct hits were needed to bring a Cone down. While I was stopping four of them a dozen advanced to within yards of us.

We ran again. The tunnel seemed to go on for ever. There were no branches to right or left. We tried a short, hard sprint to get well ahead of the Cones, but they didn't slacken their speed and we tired too quickly.

Joann was already stumbling, and I had to hold her, helping her along. There was fire in my lungs and throat, and I was drawing the stale air into my chest with tremendous, convulsive gasps. There were no faults in the tunnel wall—no cracks or crevices wide enough to take our bodies. We were both slowing down now, and ahead the air would be worse. Already, in the terrifying closeness of the tunnel, my

vision was beginning to blur as the pressure of blood built up behind my eyes.

We had to stop. If we went on we would suffocate. I swung Joann around, almost throwing her off her feet. She fought me, panic-stricken, struggling to get away from me. But I held her. I levelled my rifle and began firing; and as the Cones lumbered closer and their frenzied rustling seemed to roar in the narrow tunnel I pumped the trigger while the weapon leapt in my hands until there was only a click on bare metal and I knew that my ammunition was gone.

I threw the rifle down then, forced Joann to one side of the tunnel and pressed her hard against the curving wall. Then, protecting her with my own body, feeling the warm panting fear in her heaving breasts, I turned off the torch . . . And we waited.

Long, endless moments went by. The Cones were closer now, moving at speed, and I felt Joann stiffen as they drew nearer. There was no light now. We were blind. I cursed myself silently for not keeping the rifle to use as a club; and for an instant I half turned away from Joann, beginning to stoop, groping for the weapon. Then, in that same moment, there was an explosion of sound that jerked me erect. A rifle! Fired twice!

I jerked a hand downward, seized the torch, flicked it on. And in the flare of light I saw—and I could scarcely believe it—that the Cones were milling helplessly, caught by the rifle fire that was thundering out of the tunnel. Two of them rushed at the light, and Joann screamed. But I flung myself forward, snatching up the empty rifle and wielding it savagely. The Cones fell back, recoiling with the others; and now the rifle fire from the far end of the tunnel was increasing. Bullets whined off the walls close beside us, and I shouted then, cupping my hands and warning Brightan—it had to be Brightan—that we were here.

Moments later, torch flashing, he came out of the shadows, picking a way through the fallen Cones. He moved easily and confidently, and as Joann and I went toward him I knew that he had taken Second City—that the fire in the storeroom had led him to us—and the ship had been won as far as the Ruins.

Now we would face the Presidium.

six

When we got back to the surface, Brightan's army was already reforming. All over the city now there were fires that marked the destruction of the mutant Cones. Many of the Giants, resisting fiercely, had also been killed. Others were being herded together now, the fight gone out of them. Brightan's Pleb force had done its work well—they and the Gids had suffered only slight casualties.

Now, as the force was regrouping I told Brightan how Joann had thought the weight of arms and men was to be deployed against the Plebs. His tough face grew concerned as he listened to my account of our flight through the tunnel, and when I finished, he accompanied Joann to the rear of the column, ordered a Gid to look after her, and was subdued and unsmiling as he gave us the signal to begin our advance.

Leaving a token force behind us in the Ruins, we moved on toward Pleb City. Brightan was in contact with the flanking attacks now, as they began to flow through the transmitters, forming twin spearheads that would angle in from left and right.

For a time we met little resistance; but as we broke out of the wild ponics and began to cross cultivated ground we were checked momentarily by a hastily formed upperdeck militia. They fought without heart though, and in the beginning dawn they were ludicrously conspicuous in multi-coloured robes. Our pincer attack snuffed them quickly and we moved on.

When we broke into Pleb City there were Presidium snipers already stationed in the higher buildings. A dozen of our men fell before the last of these was weeded out, but we were moving onward in a rush now, penetrating to the Lower Place itself, where the steel pillar—reminder of Presidium rule—stabbed upward into the lightening sky. Ahead was the companionway leading to the Power Room, and here Brightan signalled me forward—I was familiar with this section of the ship—and at a crouch, splitting into two groups now, we rushed the Power Room, fighting hand to hand until we had control, then advancing up the second companionway while one group took rearguard positions.

As we fanned out across the avenue, moving down the wide street, a stillness seemed to have settled over the ship. We passed fearful groups of upperdeck people, huddled unarmed in the narrower passagetubes. We walked slowly, weapons at the ready, and now, as we approached the heart of the Presidium itself I could feel the first heat of triumph flushing into my cheeks. Nothing could stop us now. We were going to break through . . .

The first blast of the heat weapon struck a dozen yards to my left and twenty men were killed instantly. The second cut a swathe through the line only feet away to my right. Brightan was hit and badly burnt, but he didn't die. He didn't even fall. His uniform was on fire and one arm was useless, but he was bellowing orders, blasting us out of the line of fire with his tongue. He ran with us, tearing the upper half of his uniform away. The skin of his arm was black; his face was scorched, the hair gone. We hit a passagetube together, throwing ourselves clear of the heat ray as it lashed out again.

There were others here with us, some wounded, some shocked. The smell of burning flesh was everywhere. I didn't waste time. I wriggled closer to Brightan, gripped his good arm; and he turned, teeth clenched tight against pain. Outside, the avenue had been cleared. A quarter of our force was gone.

"Give me five men!" I thrust my face close to Brightan's. "I know the way. I could get a small force through to that gun!"

Brightan was already shaking his head. He wouldn't give an order that might kill others. And now I knew what I had to do. The Presidium's murder weapon couldn't be taken by an army. But one man could do it. Brightan was out of his senses with pain. He tried to pin me down as I pushed myself erect, loaded weapon in my hands. I shook him free, moved forward two slow paces, and eased myself round the corner of the building.

My back was pressed hard against the steel wall. With the sweat rolling down my body I edged along the side of that building, burnt ponics under my feet. My eyes were on a point that seemed beyond reach—the entrance to a passagetube I knew well.

All the way along that steel wall I was expecting the heat weapon to fire again. But it never did. I got to the passagetube, swung round the corner, and was safe. Now, rifle levelled, I pushed my way through unarmed upperdeck people. I turned to my left, running now with my rubber-soled boots silent on the steel deck. The passagetube ahead was deserted. The lighting was poor here, but now the doors on either side were familiar. I slowed to a walk, passed one door, then another. Then I stopped.

For one moment I stood outside the place that had once been my home. Then, twisting the lock back, kicking once at the door and swinging it open, I went forward into the cabin.

My rifle was up high, trained on Jack before he could turn. To one side, my mother was wide-eyed and fearful, hands lifting in reflex action. My father wasn't here.

I didn't say anything. I took two quick paces toward Jack—a pale and frightened Jack—chopped him across the throat with the edge of my hand, and caught him as he fell. I handled him roughly. Mother rushed at me, but I set her gently aside. I forced Jack's arm up his back and drove him forward. He shrieked like a girl as the pain leapt into his shoulder, and suddenly I was remembering my own pain, years ago, when he had done this to me.

Savagely, toughened in soul by Brightan's training, I forced him out into the tube, swinging him to the right, going back the way we had come. We met upperdeck men, and I shoved them aside. Jack fought me briefly then, but I held him, and no one moved in to take him away from me. Now, as I took him closer to the avenue Jack began to whimper and plead for himself. I heard the roar of the heat weapon as it fired again, and I knew a tentative advance had been stopped. Jack squirmed desperately in my arms as we felt the backlash of the ray.

But we didn't move out into the line of fire. We came to a halt a yard from the end of the tube, and now, close beside us, was the natural ladder Jack and I knew so well. The corner of a window, the top of a door frame, another window, a crevice—and then the roof of the deck house.

"Up there!" I told him now.

He didn't hesitate. The muzzle of the rifle was hard in his back as he began to climb. He gripped the ledge of the window, pulled himself upward until his scrabbling feet found a hold

and he was able to balance, reaching high for the door frame. I swung up after him, hanging by one hand as I gestured savagely at the upperdeck men below us, waving them back. Then, following Jack, I climbed to the roof; and here, as I eased myself over the edge, Jack made his last attempt to fight me. He swung with his foot and caught me in the shoulder, but he was too late and I was balanced now. I came up fast, rising with the rifle in my hands. Jack backed away, the fear written into his face. But I didn't fire. I needed him.

I pushed him forward again, silently; and together we crossed those rooftops, leaping over narrow passagetubes, moving toward the head of the avenue.

Up here we were hidden from the men who were operating the heat gun, and now, as we drew closer, I pressed a hand to Jack's shoulder, forcing him to his knees. We crawled along the final roof—and now each sound from a boot or a knee scuffing over steel set the hair prickling at the back of my neck.

For a moment, when we reached the edge of the roof, we lay motionless; and my eyes were close to Jack's as he twisted toward me. He knew we were going down, and he was sweating faintly now, as the fear took hold of him. Below us was another passagetube—and this one would take us to the gun itself. But we didn't know the climb. There were thirty dangerous feet below us now, and Jack would be leading the way.

I grinned at him then—actually enjoying this. He could betray us now. A single shout. A wave. But he would die as agonizingly as I would, swept to oblivion in the heat ray. So he didn't shout or wave. He moved forward, let himself slide over the edge of the building, white fingers gripping the roof for a frantic moment until his feet found a hold. Then he started down, and I followed.

I climbed smoothly, feeling the quiet strength in my arms and legs. Brightan had trained us well. Inactivity had weakened men like Jack, but I was tough and confident, and the pumping fear in me was almost exhilarating.

As Jack reached the deck, I let myself drop. I landed noiselessly on rubber soles, crouched now, rifle levelled. I stabbed a hand out and held Jack in against the steel wall. Then I went forward—two slow paces—and looked around the edge of the building.

There were four men—four Presidium members—operating the heat gun. It was shielded around its barrel—a deadly, armoured weapon that even Brightan hadn't known existed—but its sides were open. It was set at the end of the avenue, behind the strip of ponc lawn that marked the beginning of the Presidium's sanctuary. At its rear were the private chambers of the committee, where the handful of top men, my father among them, would be cowering from the invasion forces.

I had seen enough. The heat gun was fluidly mounted—it could be trained on me and fired in an instant. But there was one person who could prevent this happening. Jack was the elder son of a Presidium member. No one would kill him without a moment of hesitation.

And a moment was all I needed.

I turned quick then, the decision made. I jerked Jack toward me, pivoted, and was behind him. I jammed the rifle into his back and flung him out of the passagetube.

I was a yard behind him, and he knew he was dead if he tried to break away. I was down low, and already the big heat gun was swinging in our direction. They could see me and they could see Jack, and it was Jack who stopped them.

They didn't fire. They waited an instant too long. And even when the rifle began pumping in my hands and the men at the gun began to fall, no one depressed the button that would kill an heir to the Presidium.

I went forward in a rush then, flinging Jack to one side; and already, down the avenue, men were breaking cover. I whirled, raised one arm, and the invasion force closed in quickly. Brightan was at their head, one arm dangling, his burnt face grotesque under the sunlights.

There was no more firing. The two men still alive at the heat gun flung their hands high. Jack lay where he had fallen, pale face buried in his hands. And now we advanced on the sacrosanct quarters. Brightan and I, side by side. We fired together and the lock burst apart. We went on into the inner chambers...

The great ship that had travelled so far fell through white clouds to a blue world of promise. A man and a woman stepped from the ship, hand in hand, and named this world Bliss.

—David Rome

*The City was built up and down, Level upon Level.
The sun, stars, sky and ocean were but legends in
forbidden history—until Gordon found the Books,
then the pressure really began to increase in his
mind.*

P R E S S U R E

by LEE HARDING

Gordon stopped writing and looked up at the clock. It was a round, vulgar little anachronism standing on four spindly legs on a corner of the bookshelf. Its pious hands were indicating two minutes to ten and it was ticking noisily.

He compressed his lips into a narrow, almost invisible line and his right hand resumed the task of transmitting his muddled thoughts to paper.

Tonight, he wrote, I noticed that even the ticking of the clock has begun to annoy me . . .

And as he sat before his cramped little table and struggled to enter the substance of the day's happenings into his diary, Doreen's voice penetrated the walls of his bedroom.

"Ralph, darling . . ."

His hand gripped convulsively on the ball-pen and the plastic splintered between his fingers.

The door behind him opened. His wife stood framed in the doorway, regarding his unturned back petulantly. "The Barkers just phoned," she informed. "They thought we might like to come over for a game of scrabble."

Gordon stared hard at the bookcase. The torrent of words washed over him and forced the lines of his face towards

intolerable agony as his wife's voice droned on in that predictably nagging manner he had come to detest. And he couldn't face her, for fear that her nasty, suspicious little mind might be surprised into burrowing for the truth.

Oh, curse the Barkers and their infantile preoccupation with party games !

But the noise of her voice. It was cutting his mind to shreds.

"Not tonight," he said. "Some other time."

"Oh, you and your silly work !" she snapped. "Who do you think you are, writing in little books all the time—an Historian or something ?"

The word *write* was a dirty word in her mouth. To Doreen and uncountable millions like her any form of self-expression was simply incomprehensible.

Faced with his silence she stormed back into the living-room, slamming the bedroom door behind her. The concussion exploded a cloud of red flashes inside his head and sent his senses reeling under the impact. He grabbed desperately at the edge of the table to keep from falling into the aching pit of unconsciousness that swept up to engulf him, and somehow succeeded.

His normal world gradually swam back into focus as his vision cleared and he looked down at the broken pieces of ball-pen in front of him. Somewhere a clock ticked even louder than before, innocent of the fact that it was causing its owner discomfort.

He was still sitting there a while later when Doreen's voice again pounced hungrily through the closed door and fastened sharp little teeth on the tatters of his mind.

"I'm going over to Pat and Norm's. You can stay in there all night if you want to—and get your own damn supper."

There was the sound of irate heels clicking angrily towards the front door of their unit and then the muffled sound of it closing behind her.

Thank God, he breathed. *Thank God for the Barker's and their childish pre-occupations.* At least they had given him a few hours respite. A weak sigh escaped his lips and he leant back in his chair and rubbed his aching forehead. His eyes sought and found the clock, his mind groping for and analysing the enigma of its ticking.

Was he losing after all ?

The clock stared back. It was nothing more than a box full of whirring gears, and yet it was somehow conspiring to threaten what little peace of mind he now possessed. He considered switching it off, and then remembered that it was non-electric and that he'd have to dismantle its innards in some way.

The thought was dismissed almost as quickly as it came. To take such an action would signify a failure on his part. And one failure could lead to the complete destruction of his plans ; he must follow everything through to the last decimal point of endurance.

So he compromised : he would endure the noise of the clock until it ran down. After that it need not annoy him for he wouldn't wind it up again. The thing was completely unnecessary, anyway. The wall clock in the livingroom was silent and accurate, as were all the official clocks in the City for they came under direct guidance of Control. But *this* thing was forever losing time—when it wasn't gaining it. It was useless, really, nothing more than an ornament, like the faded volumes in his bookshelf and the ancient paintings around the wall of the bedroom and the assortment of ornamental trivia dotting the furniture. Anachronisms all, bridges to a forgotten past.

With Doreen gone and the blare of the tri-di absent there was a chance that a resemblance of peace and quiet might return to his room, amidst which the bothersome ticking of the clock could easily fade to an inaudible background murmur.

As he sat and explored the extent of his predicament, fatigue fell upon him unexpectedly and he welcomed it thankfully like a man who has exhausted himself almost beyond the powers of recuperation.

Which in effect he had.

He undressed and crawled into bed, wrapping the warm silence around him and letting his body stretch out luxuriously beneath the thermo sheet and anticipated the balm of sleep.

He lay there, unmoving, for some time. His ears probed the solitude distrustfully and then fastened upon a familiar intruder. The clock ticked noisily, the sound rising steadily in volume until it threatened to swallow the universe.

He gritted his teeth and burrowed deeper into the bed. He had imagined he had successfully cast the offending clockwork out of his mind, and here it had returned and a hundred times more vicious than before.

Was there no end to the torture ?

Grimly, he tried to sweat it out. He *must* win, otherwise he was as good as finished. Once the first chink appeared in his armour he feared that a rapid descent into despair would be inevitable.

A number of times he thought wildly of getting up and finding some way to stop it, but each time a small voice called up from the depths of his suffering. *Hold on*, it said, *hold on . . .*

And he held on. He was not even sure of sleep when it came. His mind was a jumble of images in which the real intermingled with the stuff of dreams and nightmares until it became impossible to distinguish one from the other. But sometime during the long night he did manage to salvage a few ragged hours of sleep before the new day dragged him back into the growing maelstrom of existence.

When he awoke in the morning the sense of failure hung like a dirty taste in his mouth. But the world was *quiet*.

He got up and dressed like a man awakening from a drugged sleep. His mind had been dulled and blunted by the night's ordeal ; it would be well into the day before he would be capable of thinking with his customary efficiency.

Still shrugging off the cobwebs of sleep, he walked over to the dressing table in search of his shoes. His bare feet trod on something small, sharp and broken. He winced and looked quickly down, and there on the carpet were the scattered innards of the clock. Its plastic face was crushed and broken, one hand pointing rudely to twelve and bits and pieces of its now silent mechanism lying beside it. There was a mark on the wall near the door where it could have been thrown with stunning force.

Then it hadn't been a nightmare at all. He *had* broken ; he *had* finally been able to stand the terrible noise no longer and he *had* got up and picked the clock up with trembling hands and dashed it angrily against the wall of the bedroom. He had thought the incident nothing more than another vague phantom of dream.

He felt sudden anger at the weakness in him that was responsible for such an irrational action. But the clock was silenced now. It could not annoy him again. He pushed the broken pieces under the synthetic carpet and put the battered clock away inside one of the built-in wall cupboards.

In the toilet he doused his face vigorously in cold water and towelled his face and arms roughly in the hope of dispelling some of the fog of headache that still clung to him. As he bent over the washbasin one hand rose automatically towards the medicine chest for a headache capsule, but just as quickly returned to the basin.

He stared at his drawn, haggard face in the mirror and thought : *God, but I'm looking old !* He was thirty-five, but the face of the man in the mirror looked closer to fifty. Was this to be the result of his meddling with the dictates of Control ?

And he would *not* take any capsule—not even to relieve his headache. Total abstinence was the only way to prove his theories. He would see it out to the bitter end.

After he had removed the overnight stubble he reached inside the medicine chest and behind the brightly coloured capsule containers extracted the diminishing ball of flesh-coloured cotton wool. He pulled away two tiny tufts of the material and worked them carefully into the cavities of his ears, taking great care to make the tiny plugs of wool inconspicuous. This done he felt ready to face the world for another gruelling day. But today, as he had done for the past week, he found himself wondering : today *might* be the last. He couldn't get away with what he was doing indefinitely. Control wasn't that big a fool.

Doreen was sitting disconsolately at the breakfast table when he walked into the dinette. He hadn't heard her come in during the night and she had not disturbed him ; they had been sleeping in separate rooms for some time now and the arrangement suited them both.

The clock in the living-room had indicated nine-fifty. That left only five minutes for breakfast and the thought pleased him greatly, for he would have only a little time to endure the pressure of his wife's company.

The thought brightened him considerably. There was even an uncommon tenderness in the goodbye kiss to his wife and a new lift to his steps as he made for the front door.

"Have you taken your pills ?" she called after him.

He stiffened, one hand on the door knob. "Yes," he lied. "See you this afternoon." And closed the door behind him.

Before stepping on to the footstrip Gordon paused outside the door of their unit, like a dog testing the air. Sound was

already buffeting at the raw wound inside his head. But his confidence had returned ; the strain of the previous evening didn't seem half so bad now as it had in the bleary first light of morning. Perhaps he had made some headway at last.

Overhead, the solid block of housing Units rose above him. There was a lot to be said for living at Ground Level. A man spent enough time as it was riding up and down the buildings in elevators. His eyes travelled up to where the towering grey blocks met the floor of the next Level that formed the roof of Gordon's world. And while the City groped ever higher towards the sky, below him the great structure dropped away to an awesome chasm that sought blindly for the sub-Levels. But all this was hidden from Gordon's eyes and those of his fellow workmen for the ground of his Level 23 in turn formed the roof over the levels below. And so it went.

Gordon's Level had wide streets interlaced with sweeping overpasses and humming footstrips. Here and there the occasional twitter of a gyro or the distant murmur of machinery concealed within the stark simplicity of the buildings broke the immediate silence. But that was before the people appeared on the scene ; the vast tide of commuters pouring forth from their housing Units and invading the footstrips that carried them off to their respective destinations, and turned the whole sterile world into a harsh, raucous bedlam with their loud, senseless talk.

This is my world, Gordon thought, bitterly. *The whole god-damned awful world.* Why had he come to loathe it so ? Even before he had stopped taking the little scarlet capsules he had begun to detest it.

A succession of footstrips carried him to his destination. Computer Control Centre was a vast building little different from similar constructions around it. Indeed, the whole city seemed composed of the same featureless metal and plastic. Inside its walls was a complex, omnipotent machine which held the great equation of the City balanced within its electronic innards.

Gordon was whisked rapidly to his particular floor and he stepped out of the elevator and made his way along the long corridor to his compartment. Once enclosed within the small room he felt his body relax a little and he felt quite calm as he seated himself at his desk. His arms folded, he stared at the bank of instruments before him and solemnly waited.

The whole procedure of his working day was quite simple. In a little while the chute to his left would burp out a mountain of punched cards which he, in turn, would insert into the narrow mouthpiece leading to the portion of the computer's brain responsible for Statistics and after a short wait the answer to the problem would be expelled through the smaller chute on his right. After decoding the punched card he would place the typewritten paper in a small container which would be sucked along a maze of tunnels until it finally reached its destination. Gordon had little idea where that destination would be, nor did he care. He did his part of the job, beyond that he never worried. Or at least he never *had* worried up until now . . .

It was all very simple and required the minimum of mental exertion. Sometimes the door behind him would open and a girl would come in with an urgent typewritten interrogation sheet which he would have to transpose on to a punched card and then insert into the machine. That took time and broke the monotony.

Perhaps that was what Control intended.

Nowadays Gordon's working hours were plagued by a variety of elusive questioning thoughts. Today it was this : *I wonder what people do with themselves?* Oh, he knew that Norm worked in Maintenance and Charley had something to do with Air Conditioning, but what about the rest of those nameless strangers he saw on the footstrips?

And you couldn't call Norm or Charley's work real *work*, no more than his. Work was something vital, exciting, *interesting*. At least, that was the way it appeared in the old books he had read. Not this monotonous existence. People only seemed to be filling in time. A number of times he had been unsettled by the thought that the City could quite easily dispense with their services entirely, so utterly pointless did their activities appear to him, as if the hours they worked were nothing more than a token offering, something to keep them occupied and out of mischief.

Another more horrifying thought occurred to him : was Control nothing more than a vast *machine*, something similar to the Computer he served, that had little need for human symbiosis?

As though in censure for these thoughts he noticed that the hum and throb of the workings of the vast brain had begun to penetrate into his mind by extremely devious means. It by-

passed his auditory nerves completely and instead inveigled its annoying way through the very stuff of his body. His skeleton became the carrier of annoying, devastating vibrations which suggested they might ultimately shake his body apart.

By the time the mid-day lunch break arrived his resolve of the morning had crumbled beneath the onslaught of the insidious vibrations. There seemed no way to escape them. His position in the cubicle threatened to become unbearable.

He made his way quickly out of the building and on to a footstrip that carried him over to the main elevator shaft connecting the various Levels of the City. He rode the plastic ribbon apprehensively, the muted sounds of the city's pulse struggling to pierce his numbed senses in a thousand different ways. Already he was fearing a recurrence of the previous day's terrors, and the prospect appalled him. He must find solitude, if only for the two short hours ahead of him.

The guards at the Shaft scrutinised his pass and then let him through into the elevator. The door slid shut and the cube descended rapidly, pressing Gordon's stomach against his ribs and bringing on the familiar nausea.

The lift fell deeper into the bowels of the City. Level after Level slid invisibly past and then the cube came to a gentle stop and the doors slid across to reveal the familiar streets of Level One. Two guards took his pass and examined it more carefully than their counterparts on Level 23. They finally let him through and he walked out into the quiet streets.

It was only recently that he had discovered the remarkably quiet atmosphere that existed on the lower Levels, and on One in particular. This was the guts of the City that laboured to keep the upper levels alive. Here, also, the pulse of life seemed to have slowed almost to a standstill and people moved like sleepwalkers through the dimly-lit streets.

He had first fled here a little more than a week ago, when the noise and discord around him had become too much to bear, and down the only direction in which he could flee. His Class 7 pass allowed him unrestricted travel between Levels 1 and 23. Further down, the *sub*-Levels pulsed with enigmatic life, forever hidden from his kind. Rumour had it that they were the life blood of the city which in turn fed the machines of Level One. Higher up, of course, rose the forbidden ramparts of the Upper Levels.

Gordon had never seen the sun. The moon and the stars were equally unattainable and seasons but a myth. There were stories that the Higher Ups could really crane their necks up and actually see open sky instead of the grey foundation of another Level.

He would have given a great deal to travel to the Upper Levels—but such requests could only be construed as insubordination and would be dealt with accordingly. A man must stick to his allotted Level. He could go *down* if he wished to discover and be awed by the workings of the City, but any attempt to climb higher in search of mental enlightenment was forbidden. What was it that Control was afraid of? Why were there *restrictions*?

Like the old days, he thought, when people had to go through a vast mountain of red-tape just to visit another country. Perhaps human nature hadn't changed a great deal, merely accelerated some of the dogmatic ideas of the race.

There were none of the familiar footstrips to carry him along. Here a man used his limbs and walked, as he had done in the Old Days before the dreadful hive existence had begun.

That was what bothered Gordon more than anything. *Why* had it begun in the first place, and where would it all end? Mankind had faced the beginning of the twenty-first century with the stars in their grasp and somehow had lost them.

Or had they?

That was something Gordon was trying to find out.

The overhead lighting was dim and antiquated and the streets narrow and not too clean. More like passageways, really, for here vehicular traffic was unheard of. Behind the massive walls of the buildings lay the completely automated machinery responsible for handling the waste disposal of the City, as well as the beginnings of the vast network of air-recirculation pipes and water systems that stitched together the Levels. It was no wonder that, if the sub-Levels were referred to as the brains and heart of the City, then Level One was obviously the guts.

Where this particular Level differed from those higher up was in the manner in which time seemed to have flowed to a stop momentarily, casting up odd lumps of the past on to the backwaters of the present.

For here there were shops, row upon row of them offering anything from food to clothing to knick-knacks for sale. And

shops were unheard of on Level 23. Here was the domain of the city's proletariat and the people were surrounded with the symbology of their world.

As he walked along the crowded but quietly undulating streets he became aware of the vast weight of the City pressing down upon him, while around him it swelled to join the borders of other Cities and so conspired to girdle the globe with a single sheath of metal and plastic.

Is this all? his conscience kept demanding. *Is there no more to life than this?*

He finally found the little shop he was looking for and opened the door and walked in.

The little bell still jangled inanely above his head. He closed the door behind him and its cry was stilled. Inside it was as he had remembered it, as it had been on his last visit two days ago.

It was a small room, divided midway by a counter and around it on all sides were tables stacked high with an assortment of drama tapes and musical compositions. All this failed to interest him. It was the back of the room that drew his thirsty attention. One corner was devoted to a few rows of carefully stacked books.

Real books.

A door at the back of the little shop opened and the old man came in. Gordon didn't know his name, if indeed he possessed one. Any identity the man might have once had now seemed submerged by the accumulated weight of years. His face was heavily lined, but friendly, and he welcomed Gordon with customary enthusiasm.

"Good day, Mister Gordon. So pleasant to see you again. Anything in particular you are looking for?" His voice filtered softly through Gordon's ear plugs.

Gordon shook his head. "Just browsing," he lied.

"But of course." The old man made a vague gesture with one hand, giving Gordon his customary freedom of the shop, and then sat down behind the counter and busied himself sorting tapes.

Gordon looked impatiently through some of the tapes, purchasing a few for the sake of appearances, and then wandered over to the hand bound volumes in the corner. His pulse quickened noticeably as his eyes moved over the lettering on the spines. Some were faded and difficult to read. They

must be old, he thought, and wondered *how* old. Already he had more than a dozen of the books back home in his own room. He had bought them one at a time when expenses permitted. His ambition was to ultimately own the lot, but that would take more spending money than he could expect in a lifetime.

For the present he had to content himself with procuring those items that particularly fascinated him. And then there was the uneasiness which made him wary to show too great an interest in the Old Books. There was no telling just how Control might construe such an interest. The puzzling thing was that they even allowed shops like this to exist . . .

"I see you like the old books," the proprietor remarked from his place at the counter.

Gordon looked around. "They do interest me," he replied. "I suppose it's just different to putting a tape in a viewer, that's all."

The old man nodded. "There's not many who are interested in printed books any more, you know. Only collectors. Are you a collector, Mister Gordon?"

"Yes, I suppose I am. But in a small way, you understand." And, in a way he was. A collector of enigmas, of things that didn't add up or make sense.

Most of the printed volumes he had accumulated were simply technical treatises devoted to the City and its workings, issued by Control to satisfy a demand for hand-printed work amongst the odd-balls of society. And then, only those few days ago had had stumbled upon this place and the fascinating contents. He had asked the old man if there were any other bookshops on the Level and he had replied, rather sadly, Gordon thought, that there were not. His was the last in the City. Perhaps, and this was an ominous thought, the last in all the World.

His attention returned to the books, Gordon was annoyed to see two particular volumes missing. After a fruitless search he turned to the proprietor and said: "Those two volumes on astronautics you had here the other day; I can't seem to locate them." He tried to make his voice sound as calm and detached as possible.

The old man got up and came over to him. A puzzled frown deepened the lines of his face. "Astronautics?" he said, dubiously. "Which ones were they?"

"I don't remember the titles, but I do know the names of the writers. One was Clarke and the other was Ley, I think. They were here the day before yesterday . . ."

The other's face brightened then. "Oh, *those* ancients."

Was it imagination, Gordon wondered, or did he detect a faint flicker of amusement in the old man's eyes?

"They went yesterday. Another young chap bought them. I think he was from Higher Up—maybe around your Level. He had a Class 6 pass, anyway." He looked appropriately disappointed for Gordon's sake. "But if there's anything else I can . . ."

"No, no, that's all right." Gordon paid for his tapes and left the shop, his thoughts spinning wildly all the time. So he wasn't the only one after all. There *were* others as curious as he was. But he was dismayed, none the less, that he had missed out on those two books. They may have helped to clear up a few of the unanswered questions gnawing away inside him.

He boarded the elevator and ascended to Level 23 and then back to his cubicle in Computer Control Centre. When he arrived, there was a heavy batch of work lying beneath the incoming chute. He fell to the task half-heartedly. After all, was it really *necessary* to go through this rigamarole day after day? Why couldn't those in need of the information submit it directly to the computer themselves instead of channelling it through him and thousands like him? Was it really because the City was so vast and complex that it needed the efficient operation of countless individual cells?

But the more he studied the problem the stronger grew his conviction that the work he was engaged upon was nothing more than a token offering. Such being the case he saw little reason to really overwork himself, so he pushed the pile of cards to one side and rested his head on his crossed arms and tried to wangle a brief rest before the sharp sabres of discord resumed their merciless hacking away at his mind.

His thoughts wandered. Inevitably, he brought together their various skeins and traced the sum of his accomplishments.

Even now he could not easily define when the first spark of rebellion had burst into life. Sometime before even the discovery of the old Histories in the Central Library, perhaps. It had grown from the slow accumulation of curiosity which

the passage of information through his cubicle in Statistics had fed. It was those intriguing facts which had first caused him to wonder about the system he lived under. What he did find difficult to accept was the fact that none of his friends or workmates exhibited a similar curiosity, and after a few abortive attempts to communicate his ideas he thought better of it, and kept his doubts to himself.

It was much later that he had discovered the faded yellow books buried deep within the thousands of tapes crammed into the Library. At first he had expected merely another of the endless treatises on the running of the City, but as he carefully turned the ancient pages he began to realise that he held within his hands something different to the average printed text-book.

Before his eyes a vast printed panorama of history opened before him. Chronicled within the seven volumes was a concise history of the World from the thirteenth to the twentieth century. This was an incredibly more detailed history book than any he had previously encountered. There was so much hidden within the dusty tomes that for a while he imagined that the whole thing was a gigantic work of fiction. Later, he began to believe all that he read was true and he lost count of the number of times he returned to the Library to devour the contents of the books.

Nowadays, he found time to wonder just what those particular books were doing there in the first place, for to a mind as curious as Gordon's the contents therein were literal dynamite, and bound to spark off further curiosity. But then, perhaps the volumes had been forgotten with the passage of years, in much the same way as the bookshop on Level One.

In the weeks that followed his discovery of the Histories his whole world gradually turned upside down and he was forced from one enigma to another. There seemed no end to the unanswered questions nagging away at him.

After reading the lengthy volumes one fact emerged clearly in his head. The history ended with the closing years of the twentieth century. Earth had established bases on the moon and had already sent probes to the nearer planets.

And this was the twenty second century, the year two thousand one hundred and ninety-two—or so Control said. There was every reason to be doubtful of what Control said, he had discovered.

There was no mention of the Cities in the History. Oh, there were *cities* all right—London, Paris, Rome, Moscow, Chicago and the like, but no Cities. The great hives of steel and plastic stretching up into the sky were non-existent at the close of the twentieth century. There wasn't even the faintest hint of the future man would carve for himself in the rabbit warrens of his own miserable planet. And why should there be, for hadn't man possessed the stars in his hands as the century came to a close?

Something had happened to the human race since then. Something had caused it to evolve into this stagnant, hive-like existence; something had caused real history to be suppressed and only a skeletal substitute taught in the Schools.

Most important of all there was no mention of the scarlet capsules.

Everybody took them—Control made it compulsory from the age of two years onwards. Two a day, one in the morning and one in the evening. Vitamin Supplements, Control called them. But why have them at all? If the food they ate was vitamin deficient to a certain extent, why couldn't the supplements be introduced into the food when it was synthesised?

There was something suspiciously unbalanced in that particular puzzle, but try as he would he couldn't come up with a better explanation than Control's.

It was but a short step from those first tentative suspicions to a complete lack of faith in everything concerned with Control Computer Centre and in fact everything about his life that he had once accepted without question.

In time he was unable to resist the temptation of the Computer. He began by cautiously submitting questions completely irrelevant to his problems, and then one day he took his first nervous plunge.

Why do we take the scarlet capsules? read the holes punched into the small card.

Very quickly, he thought, the brain had shot out a card into his hands. His eyes quickly translated the message.

Define the term 'we.'

He swore and repunched the question and inserted it into the narrow orifice again.

Why do human beings take the scarlet capsules?

The answer was the familiar warning dictated by Control. He knew it by heart, had known it since he was two years old.

The Capsules are supplementary dietary combinations which the Law requires you to take as prescribed. To abstain from this will result in . . .

Gordon screwed the card up and cast it into the disposal chute. He hadn't really expected anything more revealing. After all wasn't the Computer the slave of Control?

It was at that moment he had decided to stop taking the capsules, not only from a desire to see what would happen to him but also as a snook in the nose at Control. He had no way of knowing that in performing such an action he was committing his first tangible act of revolt against the system which kept him.

The effect of his abstinence was not immediate. He began by cutting his intake of capsules down to one a day and kept this up for two weeks. When no discomfort was apparent he dispensed with the dosage entirely and awaited the results apprehensively. At the end of three weeks he detected the first signs of *difference*, and even then he was surprised to find that he felt in no way the worse off. If anything, he felt better than he had in a long time.

It was like ridding oneself of a burden, depositing a heavy load off the shoulder, feeling well after a long sickness, coming out of the dark and into the light, like growing up all of a sudden. It was all these things, and something more subtle than that.

He felt *alive*. More completely alive than he had ever imagined. He seemed to see things with astonishing clarity, hear things with a new perception. He was able to think more clearly than he had ever believed possible.

But he was unprepared for the disastrous effects of his liberation. It took but a few days for him to realise that everybody around him seemed appallingly *wrong*. The entire population of the city seemed to be wandering around in a drugged stupor. With Doreen it was most noticeable. She had never been one for gaiety and swift repartee but quite suddenly she had become as limp and soggy and as uninteresting as an old dishcloth.

He looked around him and couldn't believe his eyes. Was the difference between them so marked? Probably not, he reasoned. It was only his astonishingly sharp mind that made the comparison so terribly obvious. But the fact remained that they *were* different, that none of them possessed his own new found alacrity.

Had he been like them, wandering around like a sleep-walker? Was this new dimension he experienced kept forever from mankind by the enigmatic capsules? If so, then Control was guilty of the most monstrous crime ever inflicted upon humanity.

But although he convinced himself that the human race were the victims of a treachery that staggered the imagination, he could still find no tangible proof. And if he did find it, what then?

He had tackled his task at Statistics with renewed vigour. No longer did his job seem senseless. He had an opportunity to find the facts he needed to corroborate the dreadful suspicions in his mind. And having found evidence he would find *some* way to display it. There must always be a way out, he kept telling himself, always . . .

During the days which passed, figures flashed across his mind and registered heavily on his strengthened memory cells. For instance, world population stood at an appalling seven billion, and was steady. It had been steady for three quarters of a century. That in itself pointed out that the limit had been reached in expansion across the globe. Why then were the stars untouched?

He had put another question to the Computer. His card asked: "*Does the human race travel to the stars and the nearer planets?*"

The machine quickly returned its reply
Insufficient data. Gordon read.

He tried again. Had mankind *ever* sent rocket ships to other planets?

Insufficient data, the machine insisted. *Refer to Control 3.*

Gordon hastily destroyed the cards. Control 3 was his Staff Officer. If he ever found out that Gordon had been tampering with procedure . . . He had no desire to incur the wrath of his superiors this early in the game. Later, it would no doubt be inevitable. But there was so much he had yet to uncover.

His period of acute well-being was short lived. After a week or so his mental health began to deteriorate rapidly. At first he was unaware of this, but in the last week it had been forced home to him repeatedly.

It had begun with noise. The first offender had been the alarm buzzer signalling his lunch breaks ; its imperative sound would sometimes jar alarmingly on his nerves. Other sounds began to annoy him. Doreen's voice in particular achieved an horrendous nagging quality he had never imagined possible. Even the accustomed sounds of the busy Level encroached upon his peace of mind.

He usually started a headache just before breakfast and it continued all through the day and into the night. Only sleep brought release. Every little noise seemed to magnify itself a thousand times and hurl itself at his consciousness. The assault continued twenty-four hours a day.

So he had begun his diary. He thought vaguely that if anything happened to him then it might be discovered by others and perhaps they might get curious, like him and in that way the seeds of destruction might be grown in Control's system. But he didn't really have much faith in his fellow man, not after having observed them from his newly discovered plane.

The liberation of his senses to a more acute degree also accelerated and increased the mental suffering he underwent. But through it all he managed to retain the clarity that had come with his refusal to bow to Control's will and keep taking the scarlet capsules. His newly-found wisdom, however, could find only one end to his quest if he continued along this pathway, and that was death. He had no concept of insanity—the very word was alien to his way of life. So he settled for death, and was even willing to face that rather than return to the lifeless existence of an automaton.

The desk beneath Gordon's head began to hum noticeably as he rested and retraced his actions of the past few months.

He opened his eyes, eyes that were suddenly very much afraid. He had never before noticed the vibration of the Computer's brain to such a degree. He looked down and could see that his arms were trembling as they braced themselves against the desk.

What new madness was this ?

His whole body was shaking now as the insidious vibrations of the computer passed through the desk and into his body. Short waves of pain started to gnaw at the false solitude of his mind.

He got up from the desk and walked around in a quick circle. The feeling passed, and he was left standing in the centre of the tiny cubicle and glaring at the chutes in the wall with intense hatred.

Gradually, his anger cooled and he began to chide his own nervousness. He walked over and picked up a few cards from the stack and began to insert them into the narrow orifice. While he waited for the answers his mind rebelled restlessly at the irritating web of routine. A new unrest rose within him and mingled with the aural discord around him.

Boredom !

He picked up another card and then flung it against the wall in a fit of temper. Then he wiped the stacked cards off the desk with one sweep of his hand. They spilled on to the floor and the sight sent a warm glow of satisfaction through him.

He couldn't go on like this. The dreadful monotony had become too much to bear. He would *not* work. Let them do something about that, he had little doubt they could manage quite well without him. Censure would be inevitable, of course, but why worry about that ? One Level was as good as another in this rabbit warren.

Something was pressing on his head. A weight, an intolerable weight making his head ache unbearably. He pressed his hands against his temples and looked up at the low ceiling of the room.

Not pressing on his head, really, but on *him*, his whole body. He felt as though he were suffocating from the weight of it. And then he knew what it was.

The City. He could feel the unknown number of Levels pressing down upon him and the walls clamping him in his cell from all sides.

"It's going to fall !" he yelled. "It's going to *crush* me . . ."

He screamed then, and covered his face with his hands and backed towards the door. His hands fumbled with the catch and he stumbled through and fled down the corridor and out of the building.

But outside was no different. The City stretched above him, Level upon Level without end. And it was going to *crush* him.

He ran on to the footstrips, whimpering now like a frightened animal, the words bubbling from his mouth, the product of a mind in the last stages of disintegration. His face was ashen and his eyes wild and lost.

He couldn't get away from the people. They were all around him, pressing in upon him like the walls of the City. And they were after him, they were all chasing him and trying to catch him.

He ran and ran, faster than the whirring plastic strips themselves, weaving his way through a barrage of noise, wading through the molten symphony of discord when the going got heavy. Sound had never assaulted him with such force. His mind was a raw, gaping wound reeling under the impact of the snarling, snapping noise the City had unleashed upon him. The cotton wool plugs lodged within his ears were a useless joke. The discord had succeeded in by-passing his auditory senses completely and had instead attacked through the very stuff of his body. Every skeletal bone, every nerve fibre was a carrier of intolerable agony leading to the ultimate destruction of his mind. And there was nothing he could do to stop it, nothing at all.

Except run. Back to Home, back to his tiny cell in his Unit block. Blind instinct took him there and slammed the door loudly behind him. He staggered into the apartment and headed blindly for the toilet. He groped inside the medicine chest and emptied the contents of the phials on to the floor. A carpet of scarlet capsules spread out before him. He ground them into the floor with his feet, whimpering like a cornered animal.

He had lost his battle. Now they would come to claim him. He had no way of knowing that his end had been predictable from the very beginning; there was no other way for the battle to go. He could never have won.

He had no strength to scream. He let his body crumple on to the carpet and lay there, feeling the monstrous crashing of his heart beat and waited for the City to crush the last vestiges of life from out of his broken body.

They collected the scattered fragments of his reason and made it whole again. And then, when he was once again able to think and act with all the faculties they had feared might be lost, they took him to see a man named Jager.

The Control Psychologist was disarmingly friendly behind his wide desk. Gordon was questioned in a casual manner and answered readily enough. His three weeks in the psychiatric ward had taught him the uselessness of deception. A hard mask of hopelessness covered the hollow shell of his failure.

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"We have read your diary, Mister Gordon," Jager said. "We found it very interesting. However, there were a few things you neglected to explain. For instance, just *why* did you stop taking the capsules?"

"I was curious. I wanted to see what would happen."

"And now that you have, what conclusions have you drawn?"

Gordon thought for a moment. "I think that the people of this City are being drugged for some reason, and the means of this sedation is in the capsules we are told to take."

The psychologist regarded him thoughtfully. "Suppose I were to tell you that your hallucinations were the direct result of extreme vitamin deprivation, caused by your abstinence from taking the prescribed capsules?"

"Then I would call you a liar, sir. I'm not that much of a fool. And then there's other things as well . . ."

"Other things? Such as, Mister Gordon?"

Gordon took a deep breath and said: "Why are we cooped up in the Cities when we should be colonising other planets? Why are we kept under all these lies, lies, *lies*?"

There was a glimmer that could have hinted at approval buried deep in Jager's compelling eyes. "You were right, Marshall," he said to the man standing immediately behind Gordon, "he *is* a damned determined fellow."

The psychologist got up. "There's something I'd like you to see, Mister Gordon."

The three of them moved out of the room and down a short corridor to a waiting elevator. The door slid shut and they began to ascend.

They were going *up*, Gordon realized, and fought back a momentary panic. After all, he had no way of knowing if they were on Level 23 at all. He had no idea where the . . . hospital . . . was situated.

But the lift went up a long way. He had never been so long in an elevator in his life. Slowly, the panic began to return.

"Relax, Mister Gordon," Jager said, smiling affably. "It won't take very long." Beside him, the aide named Marshall regarded Gordon with stony indifference.

"I think it advisable to point out," Jager went on, "at this stage of the proceedings, that your curiosity was, shall we say—tickled?—by Control very early in the piece. You exhibited degree of intelligence above the ordinary. That was why you are put into Statistics in the first place. And then there were

those Histories planted in the Library and Old Grainger's bookshop on Level One . . ."

Gordon stared at him blankly.

Jager smiled. "Don't try to assimilate it all at once, Mister Gordon. It will come to you, all in good time."

The lift slowed to a gentle stop.

The psychologist thrust a pair of goggles into his hand. "Here, you'd better put these on. You'll need them."

Gordon pulled the glasses over his head and adjusted them over his eyes. They considerably darkened the interior of the lift.

"Better try and relax," Jager advised, "and prepare yourself for something rather unique. We wouldn't have brought you up here if you hadn't already proved your mental stamina."

Before Gordon had time to ponder the meaning of his words the door slid open and light flooded the interior of the lift.

Light such as he had never before seen.

They stepped out of the elevator. Jager first, followed by a stumbling Gordon and with Marshall following closely behind him.

Gordon let his eyes wander incredulously over the world around him. A great carpet of steel stretched away on all sides, the walls so far away he could not even see them. He squinted in the unaccustomed glare, thankful that the psychologist had thoughtfully provided the dark glasses. Otherwise, the glare would have been abominable.

The ground of this Level was unlike any other he had encountered. Smooth and flat, it boasted few protuberances and no buildings whatsoever. He let his eyes rise to meet the roof high overhead . . .

But there was no roof. Only a golden sky sifting the energy of the sun itself.

He was standing on the roof of the uppermost Level of the City. And the glaring light all around him was the unimagined fire of the Sun !

Momentarily, he staggered under the weight of discovery, and Marshall supported his shoulders with a vice-like grip.

Jager looked into his stunned eyes. "Well, Gordon, do you know where you are ?"

He could only nod. And was that sparkling light in the far distance only sunlight bouncing from another myth-water ? Was that the *ocean* out there ? Beyond the hated steel and plastic of the City ?

But wasn't there something wrong ? The sky—that was it.

Wasn't it supposed to be *blue*, instead of this queer golden colour? And where were the fleecy puff-balls called clouds?

He turned his questioning eyes to Jager and the psychologist seemed to read his thoughts. "Yes, it's not quite like you expected, is it Gordon?"

Gordon shook his head, wondering why the ageing psychologist sounded so bitter.

"You wanted to know why the human race is chained to these cities when it should have claimed its birthright amongst the stars? Well," he said, gesturing up at the golden sky, "*there's* your answer."

Gordon said: "I don't understand . . ."

Jager didn't seem to hear him. "It was a little over two centuries ago," he went on. "We had a base on the moon and had sent automated probes to Mars, Venus, the Saturnian and Jovian systems. And then the Slugs came. The first thing we knew about them was a desperate radio warning from the first expedition en route to Mars. They were the first to see their gigantic sausage-shaped ships swimming in from Out There. They immediately sent word to us but there was really nothing we could do. We were like ants to men in the face of their superiority.

"We could only watch while they busily divided up the solar system and reshaped the planets to suit their needs, and fearfully awaited our own destruction.

"But some sort of compassion seemed to prevail. When they could have slaughtered us as callously as we would have slaughtered them had the boot been on the other foot, they chose instead to shut us off from the rest of the system. For that matter, from the rest of reality as well. They spun this gigantic web around Earth, an incomprehensible warp of space and time that lets in the light of the sun but through which nothing from Earth can penetrate, and left us here to die, to kill ourselves, and so absolve them of the guilt."

Gordon was beginning to understand. There had been a reason, after all.

"So you see," Jager went on, "We had nowhere to go but our own planet. We spread and we built, always in the hope that someday, somehow man's ingenuity would find some way through the Barrier.

"We were insane, stupid. Just because we had always found a way out in the past led us blindly to believe we would find a way out of this one. But we haven't, not in a hundred and seventy years.

"The population increased and the cities expanded to keep up with the birth-rate until finally a halt had to be called. With the human race shut out forever from the rest of the universe we were becoming a race of claustrophobes. Something had to be done or the race would perish from the explosion of titanic psychological pressures. Perhaps that was what the Slugs intended.

"So the drugs were introduced. Tranquilisers, they were called. Over the years the dosages had to be increased to keep up with the mounting psychological pressures growing in the Cities. But there can only be one end to such a procedure.

"We are breeding a race of psychological weaklings, Gordon. You yourself are third generation; look what happened when you stopped taking the drugs. Your mind became susceptible to just about every phobia you can think of. You just couldn't take it.

"The best of our brains are housed in the Upper Levels where the pressures are not so great, but even there its impossible to forget the implication of that golden sky overhead. They labour constantly to find some way of defeating the Barrier. In the meantime, our natural resources are being consumed at a dangerous rate. Only in the last quarter of a century have we harvested the ocean to any great extent. The only solution is gradually dropping the population to a level more appropriate to the living space. But even that can't go on indefinitely."

Gordon nodded his head, impatiently. That much he could understand, but why the mystery surrounding his own breakdown? Why had they let it happen?

"That's easy to understand, Gordon. We could easily introduce the tranquilisers into the synthetic foods—a certain amount *is*, by the way. If you hadn't gone off your food to such an extent you might never have deteriorated as much as you did.

"What we do *not* want to suppress is the natural desire for curiosity. Leaving the major intake of the drugs to the person by means of the capsules leaves room for the curious mind to ponder. You did that Gordon, but unlike a lot of others who merely lay off taking the capsules for an experiment and collapse into gibbering lunatics within a few days, *you* had the tenacity to pursue your theories to the limit. We *had* to see how far you could go. Otherwise, you would have been no use to us.

Gordon looked more puzzled than ever. "Use to you?"

"That's right. We need every rebel we can get. That's how we manage to weed out prospective Top Level workers from the millions of drugged, happy people we keep down there. The minor wayward types who only experiment but never really mean to go any further, well, we just patch them up and put them back into the rat race. But for those with your tenacity, Mister Gordon, there lies a rich reward."

That wasn't quite true, said the little voice of Jager's conscience. Most of the rebels went mad, their minds collapsing under the impact of alien psychoses. Control patched them up as best as they could and sent them back to their respective units—heavily sedated, of course. It was a dreadful business, but thanks to the Slugs, all they could do to combat the dreadful threat of race psychosis.

"There are a number of choices open to you," he explained. Gordon listened dutifully. "You can work with the scientists on the Barrier after you've been given sufficient schooling—and I might add that that takes some time. Or you can move over to Ocean Maintenance, or Reforestation. But I'll give you a complete picture when we go back inside." He smiled and held out his hand, warmly. "Congratulations, Mister Gordon, on passing the most rigid test a man ever had."

Gordon took the hand in his own and felt the warmth and friendliness pass between them. A great weight seemed to have lifted from his mind. It would be good to work with something like Ocean Maintenance. It was wonderful to be free, to be out in the open air with no cold grey roof above you . . .

Wasn't it?

They walked towards the open doorway of the elevator.

"We're not licked yet," Marshall was saying in a high-pitched voice. "We've always managed to lick our problems before."

Maybe he was right, Jager mused. The Barrier, would not, *could* not remain forever. Somehow man would find a way to rid himself of the cruel bondage imposed by the aliens. But for the moment . . .

For the moment he was tired.

The door closed and they descended into the City. Back to the Levels, back to the daily grind and the endless sifting of intelligence. Back to his patients, all three and a half million of them.

—Lee Harding

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